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For An End

by [Lycoriseum](#)

Summary

Angela is Fareeha's Sentinel - an immortal guardian who protects select humans who have achieved exceptional feats. But she has committed a crime in the past, and is sentenced to watch over Fareeha through her subsequent incarnations. Angela has learnt long ago, that it is a punishment for a reason.

Notes

Written for the Overwatch Big Bang on Tumblr.

Beta: [silencedoesntmakechange](#)

Fareeha was 26, a newly-minted First Lieutenant in the Egyptian Army, and currently on the way to meet her parents. She had stopped at a mall farther up the street to pick up two tins of tea leaves and coffee powder – gifts she specially ordered some time ago for the women who raised her. Peeking into the bag again, Fareeha looked over the beautifully decorated tins and smiled to herself. She could already hear mama's complaints about her '*enabling*' ami's addiction to coffee, even though it was a dependency the sniper had kicked a long time ago. The two would find any reason in the world to bicker. Sometimes their daughter found it endearing. Other times she wished they would just agree to disagree.

Stepping aside to avoid colliding into a harried-looking businessman, Fareeha quickly fell in step with the stream of pedestrians. She slipped past the slower ones easily, all the while holding the

bag close to her body, and before long she could see the café's signboard shortly ahead her. According to her watch, she was ten minutes late because of her little side trip. She was about to pick up the pace when a panicked shout to the side caught her attention.

Fareeha slowed her pace along with the crowd, turning her head to watch a man chasing after a toddler, who in turn ran after a green ball that bounced across the pedestrian crossing. Several cars had screeched to a halt on her side of the road – car horns punching the drivers' annoyance clear into the air. But the vehicles on the other side of the two-way road were still unaware the pair's presence. She strode unconsciously towards the edge of the sidewalk, as the man stopped in his tracks abruptly to let a speeding car pass. When his way was clear, the child bent down towards the ground, and the man had barely gotten his bearings straight when a loud horn from an incoming truck pierced the air.

Too slow. Fareeha dropped the bag in her hand, rushing forward blindly and causing a minor traffic jam on her side. Her mind had locked onto the child - who turned in place to face the truck. The man ran much too slowly. He would barely have time to grab the child, much less get them both out of harm's way.

Futile. Futile. Futile! Her head shook side-to-side in defeat, while her legs pumped faster in an attempt to achieve the impossible. Hooking an arm around the child's middle, she lifted him unceremoniously as she grabbed the man by the arm. She flung the adult towards the sidewalk, throwing the child forward even as her mind registered the hot rush of air and exhaust over her left side, and the screeching of breaks. Fareeha blindly tossed the toddler over and braced for the impact, slamming her eyes shut–

A flash of golden light seared into her vision just before her eyelids could fully close, and a sudden force against her back propelled her forward. The next thing Fareeha knew, she was looking up at the blue afternoon sky, and the concerned faces of the two she had just saved. She held a hand against her head, feeling a dull throb in the back of her skull as she tried to work through the disorientation. Fareeha was about to push herself up, when the man and toddler were pulled out of the way.

"Fareeha."

"Mama." Fareeha smiled at the worry on her mother's face. The woman knelt beside her, grey-streaked wavy hair falling forward as she bent down. Fareeha got up onto her elbows, then raised herself into a sitting position with her mother's help. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she drawled, hiding her exasperation. "It's 12.40pm. Saturday, 20th July 2066. My name is Fareeha Amari. You're my mother, Kamilah Amari. And this—" Fareeha rested a hand on Ana's shoulder when the sniper knelt down beside her. "—is also my mother, Ana Amari. See? No concussion."

"I don't know about that," Ana said. She held up Fareeha's wrist, where a watch sat. "It's 12.47. I'd say there's at least a minor concussion."

The doctor sighed as the two shared a laugh, then pulled her daughter in for a hug. Fareeha grinned at Ana ruffling her hair, then looked up when a shadow fell over them. The man from before stood with the child's hand in his own, and knelt down before the women.

"You saved my life. Our lives," he said, putting an arm around his son's shoulders. "I don't know if I can properly thank you—"

"It's alright." Fareeha waved a hand in an attempt to lighten his troubled expression. "We're safe. That's what matters."

"What happened?" Ana asked.

"She pushed us out of the way of a truck," the man replied. He turned his head back, looking for said vehicle, which was nowhere to be found. "For a moment there, I thought she wouldn't make it..."

Fareeha blinked – she had almost forgotten the blinding light before...

"Well, she did," Ana said, patting the soldier's cheek as if to prove her point. "We'll take care of her now. Don't worry."

The man nodded at the suggestion, giving a final thanks before leaving with the child in his arms. As he did so, the older women helped Fareeha up, brushing off the dirt on her clothes. Fareeha let her parents fuss over her appearance as she stared at the spot where she had stood, bracing herself against an impact that never came. Someone – or *something* – had pushed her out of the way, but...

She frowned, feeling the memory drip through her fingers like water. Fareeha was...*unsure* if it had ever happened. Was it just a figment of her imagination?

"Fareeha."

She blinked rapidly, bringing her gaze back into focus at the gentle tap on her cheek.

"Are you alright?" Kamilah asked.

"I...don't know." Fareeha frowned. A dull throb grew between her temples the more she tried to focus on the incident. "I thought I wasn't going to make it just now. But—" She shook her head slowly, eyes narrowing in concentration. "There was...a golden light. And *something* pushed me forward. I—, I'm not sure."

Kamilah peered closer at her. "Do you remember anything else?"

"No," she replied slowly. "I can barely even remember what happened."

Her mother kept quiet, placing a hand on her back and guiding her towards the pedestrian crossing, where Ana waited for them to join her.

"Don't worry too much about it," Kamilah said. "It's probably reflected light."

Fareeha nodded idly, her attention drifting when she spotted the paper bag lying on the opposite pavement.

"Oh no," she moaned, pointing at the bag. "It's dirty now."

"What's that?" Ana asked.

"I bought something for you and mama."

Kamilah groaned, "Please don't tell me it's—"

"Tea for you," Fareeha said. "And coffee for ami. *Please*—" She slung her arms around the women's shoulders when they leaned towards each other, and hugged them to her sides. "Don't argue. I was nearly in an accident."

"We don't argue," Ana retorted. "We discuss. Isn't that right, *sweetheart*?"

"Yes. And we'll discuss this later, *darling*."

Fareeha heaved an exasperated sigh, though a grin parted her lips soon after. Contentment at being reunited with her family after a year's tour of duty took root in her being, and her concern over the unexplained occurrence was soon forgotten.

Fareeha was 30 and, despite Ana's vehement protests, enlisted in the UN's counter-terrorism task force – codenamed *Enyo*. The welcome she received from her assigned battalion had been tentative; they were too aware that she was the daughter of Major General Amari, Enyo's commander. Her name erected an invisible barrier that few dared to approach, and Fareeha was grateful none knew of her mother's disapproval. That meant one less hurdle to conquer.

It took more than a few months to earn their respect, then their trust. Fareeha pulled her wounded squad mates out of the line of fire, bit a few servings of lead to protect them, and made split-second decisions that saved both their lives and the mission. Each action served to carve her own image from under Ana's shadow, until she finally stood as her own person in the eyes of her colleagues, chin held high as the General pinned a medal to her chest.

A Medal of Valour that meant little beside the soft glint in the old veteran's eyes, bearing pride for Fareeha's achievement and relief for her well-being.

Her well-being, which was critically threatened by the mission in which she had earned the medal.

Fareeha's battalion had been in Siberia, tasked with seizing control of an old military installation from the hands of an underground terrorist organisation. It was still small and had its web of influence confined within Russia; a perfect, infant stage for it to be crushed before it could expand any further. Taking this installation would cripple the organisation, hence a strict expectation of success for this mission.

The battalion's first plan was to sneak through the facility via a less guarded entrance – the service tunnels leading to its cargo bay. But they were barely halfway to security control when a team mate tripped the alarm, thus forcing them to switch to an all-out assault. Bodies and shell casings littered the floor as they carved a bloody path through the complex, until another complication arose. The moment they stepped into the control room, the self-destruct sequence for the stash of warheads had been activated in a last ditch effort at revenge. Fareeha split off from the main force with four other soldiers to stop the explosions from collapsing the installation and burying them alive, while the rest kept the enemy off their backs.

Their way to the armoury was smooth and only peppered with light resistance – easy enough for them to barrel through, until they were ambushed at the armoury's entrance. The first hail of bullets took down one of her own, but thankfully missed the engineer. Fareeha sent her and another squad mate ahead to deactivate the warheads, while she staved off the advancing platoon with the last member of her team. It was a futile effort – their ammo depleted much more rapidly than the enemy numbers. The scales were heavily tilted *out* of their favour, and a sense of impending doom weighed upon her shoulders.

Her team's radio channel was unsettlingly quiet, and she relied on their green vital signs on her helmet's display for reassurance. The same signs frayed her caution as well, pushing Fareeha to lean out of the entrance and return fire more often than was prudent. Too many bullets grazed past her helmet and shoulder pad. But she kept at it, determined to thin the group out before the fight came up close and personal. More and more bodies fell, until a grenade was tossed into their

midst.

Fareeha dove far from its range, and her ears still rang when she staggered back onto her feet. She hefted her rifle, spying her dead team mate by the armoury's entrance, then—

Wildfire scorched through her body as modified rounds ripped through her armour. Fareeha counted one, two, three, four, before she fell back on the floor, blood spewing from the corner of her mouth. A numbing chill seeped into every inch of her being. Deprived of oxygen by collapsed lungs, Fareeha's vision darkened, when an intense warmth surged through her. Back arching as she took a desperate gulp of air, Fareeha barely noticed the lack of pain in her chest, distracted by the strange yet oddly familiar flood of light. Blinding, yet soothing.

A vague impression of blonde hair and blue eyes were the last things Fareeha saw, before she lost consciousness.

When she awoke, Fareeha was in a private hospital ward back at Enyo's headquarters in Zürich. Her parents, who were engrossed in a private conversation, flew to her side upon her awakening. She managed to rasp the few questions that came to mind, and was told she had been out cold for an entire day. The mission was a success; her team was saved by reinforcements who arrived just after she fell unconscious.

Fareeha felt sluggishly about the bandages wrapped around her torso, wondering how she was still alive. She was sure the bullets had hit both her lungs, and blood had just started choking her airway before—

She glanced up at Ana when a rough hand cupped her cheek.

"Are you alright?" Ana asked.

Fareeha nodded, giving a small smile. "I just thought I was going to..." Her weak voice trailed off. The haunting sense of familiarity seemed so much more tangible in that moment. "I remember getting shot through the chest multiple times. I thought I was going to die, then...there was this light...again."

Then she remembered one new detail. Her hand shot out to grasp Ana's shoulder. "There was someone else in the armoury. Not one of us. Either a tango or..."

"There were no reports of anyone else in the entire installation," Ana told her. "We've taken over and swept the place clean. It's clear."

"Can you describe this 'someone', Fareeha?" Kamilah asked quietly.

"I..." She frowned, trying to recall hair that was...what colour was it again? And eyes. She saw eyes...right? "I don't remember. I couldn't see much. But they...*she*," Fareeha said with conviction, though she was unsure where it sprang from. "She came just as the light appeared, but then..."

"You said you were shot in the chest?" Kamilah said.

"Yes."

"You were not. Only in the stomach and shoulders," Ana corrected Fareeha's claim.

"But I—"

Kamilah's hand rested on her head, smoothing over her hair. "Don't worry about it, little one."

You're safe now, that's what matters. Just concentrate on recovering first."

Fareeha smiled faintly at the kiss on her forehead. "Is that an order, Doctor?"

"It is my advice, Captain. But if you want an order, I think the General could oblige." She nodded at Ana.

"No need," Fareeha said. "I'll rest."

Not that her body gave her much choice. The moment Fareeha shut her eyes, sleep enveloped her almost immediately. But not before she felt a soft pat on her head and heard Ana's murmur, *"I'm proud of you."*

Major Fareeha Amari was 32, and just awarded command of a 50-strong platoon that she refused to let perish on this mission. Not when they were fighting in Egypt, her home turf. Not when there were nearly 400,000 civilians in Faiyum awaiting liberation from these...*barbarians*.

Half the city's infrastructure had been destroyed. Mosques lay in ruin, denying the people sanctuary. Schools became makeshift prisons. The city hall was converted into the terrorists' central command centre – their main target. Fareeha's company, along with another, were to push a full-frontal assault from the south as two other companies hit the terrorists from the north. They were to keep the enemy forces occupied while a specialised team took an underground path to the city hall, and neutralised their leader. General Amari was personally involved in this mission as well, and led the northern assault. According to radio reports, they were advancing smoothly.

Not so for Major Amari. Fareeha had split her platoon off from the main company, in order to secure Hawara – an archaeological site turned motor pool – and cut off enemy air support. The rush towards Hawara was relatively uneventful, but the siege was met with stubborn resistance, and turned into an entrenched firefight. Fareeha's soldiers made slow progress into the VTOLs' vicinity by sprinting from one worn limestone pillar to another, and with which each alternate move she lost at least one soldier. At the rate they were going, they would have no one left to fight by the time they closed in on the enemy.

So she took a risk.

Fareeha was the closest to a VTOL. She had been trained to operate one, and it would be a most helpful distraction now.

She radioed her second-in-command to inform him of her plan. He agreed reluctantly, and they proceeded to time their platoon's fire. Upon orders, only a handful kept shooting, while the rest waited for the signal.

One, two–

"Fire!"

Fareeha sprinted from the broken pillar that was her cover. She managed to clear three-quarters of the distance before bullets started pelting the ground behind her. Optimism and adrenaline swelled within her as she reached behind the target VTOL, and lowered her rifle to reach for the door. The heavy metal ramp lowered, then she took a step in and–

Hot lead seared into her left – bicep, ribs, hip, and leg. She turned to the side – propelled by the force of the bullets – and faced a full squad of armoured fighters, watching them level their rifles again as she struggled to lift her own. An ingrained shred of instinct moved her hand to her belt, reaching for a grenade that would have been useful for eliminating that small group, if they had

not fired their rifles at her in unison.

She braced herself, somehow finding the will to die on both feet, when a flash of light blinded her eyes.

Then disappeared abruptly.

A hush fell over them, almost surreal with harsh barks of orders and merciless rattling of firearms in the background. They stared at the woman who stood between them, seemingly materialised out of thin air. Fareeha stared at the wave of blonde hair falling just past her shoulders; the simple combination of a long-sleeved white tee and black jeans that was grossly out of place in the battlefield.

The blonde's head stayed still for a second, then tilted down towards her hands. She spun around, returning Fareeha's stare with panic growing in wide blue eyes. She tried gesturing with both hands, then drew symbols in the air, looking more and more unsettled when nothing happened. Then a commanding bark from enemy squad's leader.

The blonde turned around. Eight rifles leveled at them.

Fareeha snatched the grenade out of her belt, flicking out the pin with a practiced finger, and lobbed it into the squad. She did not wait to see what happened. Instead, she dove for the blonde and threw themselves into the VTOL. Her shoulder had just landed on the metallic floor of the carrier when the grenade went off, cutting panicked exclamations short, and leaving a heavy silence during which no more movement came from the outside.

Pulling her arm away from the blonde, Fareeha got onto her knees, watching the stranger do the same. She lifted her rifle slightly as the blonde turned towards her. But before Fareeha could ask any questions, the comm piece in her ear crackled to life.

"Major! Are you there? We need fire support ASAP!"

That snapped Fareeha back to reality. She got onto her feet – pulling the blonde up by the arm as she did so – and sprinted for the cockpit. Shoving the woman roughly onto the floor towards the back of the cockpit, she motioned for her to stay there and tapped on the earpiece.

"Working on it. Hang tight." Fareeha sat in the pilot's seat, fingers flying over the console to bring up the holo-displays and turret controls. Shifting the display to face where the action was, Fareeha swiveled the turrets around and fired, downing almost a dozen bodies in one salvo. The enemy's attention swung in her direction for a split-second, long enough for her platoon to rip through their lines. The firefight continued for a few more minutes, until Enyo had wrested control of the area.

Fareeha breathed a sigh of relief, glancing at the VTOL's radar to confirm her second-in-command's report of an all-clear. She ordered them to perform a full sweep of the area, and cut the radio channel. Then she stood from the pilot's seat and went over to her companion.

She brought up the rifle when the blonde stood slowly. "Who are you?"

Blue eyes twitched almost imperceptibly, but she remained silent for a while. She regarded Fareeha with a poker face, examining her from head to toe. There was something odd about her gaze. It was wary, yes. But there was not a trace of fear to be found in her eyes. Just alertness and a hint of exhaustion.

"Angela," she said quietly after a prolonged silence.

"Your full name."

This 'Angela' seemed prone to thinking over her answers slowly. "Ziegler. Angela Ziegler."

"Where did you come from?"

"Your side."

"Don't play games with me." Fareeha's suspicion was skyrocketing. "You appeared out of nowhere. How."

"I've been by your side all along." Her pauses were getting shorter. And her answers were starting to grind on Fareeha's nerves.

"Explain yourself clearly. Or I will bring you in as a prisoner."

Angela seemed to grow more tired before her eyes, shoulders sagging just a little bit. "Then you will promise to listen, and believe that I am speaking the truth."

"How will I know if it's the truth?"

"You will have to trust me."

Fareeha's eyes narrowed. But she lowered her rifle in a gesture of 'trust' that was asked of her. "Go on."

"I am your Sentinel." At a curious tilt of the soldier's head, she explained, "A 'guardian angel', as you may put it."

Despite herself, a bark of laughter burst from Fareeha's throat. "A guardian angel? What is this, a fairy tale?"

"You promised to listen."

Fareeha nodded, then pressed her lips back together.

"I have been watching over you for a few years now. My duty is to ensure your safety until you pass of natural causes."

"Why?"

Angela raised a hand and shook her head. "Listen." She waited until Fareeha settled. "The first time I helped you was during a road accident. A *would-be* accident. You were trying to save a boy and his father from a speeding truck. You threw them out of harm's way, but could not get away in time. That was when I stepped in."

"You were...that light," Fareeha said slowly, forgotten memories resurfacing. "I felt a push on my back, then..."

The blonde nodded. "The second time was in Siberia. Both your lungs were punctured."

"I saw you back then." She shifted uncertainly on her feet, adjusting her grip on the rifle. "I... forgot about that. About you. But I should not have – you were an anomaly, and I—"

"You had no choice. I repressed your memories of each encounter. But..." Angela's gaze dropped. A glazed, faraway look clouded her eyes, before they snapped back into focus. She reached a hand out slowly, and Fareeha refrained from taking a step back when it reached for her.

Slim fingers touched her chest armour tentatively, then spread out as she pressed her palm flat against the scuffed alloy. Her brows drew together in concentration, and a small orb of heat burst to life in her chest. No – *on* her chest.

Fareeha looked down to find a muffled light shining from under her fatigues. She pulled at the collar, brows raising when she realised the pendant hanging beside her dog tags were glowing. Hooking a finger under the dull metal chain, Fareeha pulled them out, noting Angela's widening eyes. She hesitated when the blonde raised her hand, but set the pendant and tags on her palm anyway.

Angela held onto the pendant, letting the tags fall aside. The translucent crystal's white glow dimmed for a moment, before it came back to life again.

"This is what cancelled my magic and forced me to appear. Where did you get it from?" she asked.

"My mother."

Eyes twitched. "Kamilah."

Angela stated her mother's name without hesitation – snagging on the tense cord of suspicion in her body. She tugged the pendant from Angela's hand, holding it protectively in a fist. "How'd you know her name?" She paused. "How'd you even know which mother–?"

"Major."

Her second's voice cut off her train of thought. Fareeha pressed on the earpiece, keeping her eyes on Angela. "Report."

"The battle's won. Faiyum's ours. We are to guard the motor pool until the sweeps are done. Where are you?"

"In the VTOL. Keep an eye on the soldiers. I have a...situation here."

"Do you need assistance?"

"No. I'll be with you soon. Amari, out." She ended the comm link before he could protest. Lowering her hand, Fareeha regarded Angela quietly. She still harboured a deep mistrust for the woman. Despite Angela's knowledge of her near-death encounters and the claim of having...*protected* her for so long, her presence was still unexplainable. 'Magic'. The word had fallen from the blonde's tongue as though it was nothing but another branch of science.

That was it – science. There had to be a logical explanation for Angela's story. It was just out of her grasp. But that was an issue for later. Now...

"Are you able to... 'disappear'?" Fareeha asked.

"No." Angela cocked her head, and the pendant glowed again. "The crystal is blocking my magic."

She turned the situation over in her mind. Fareeha could help Angela sneak away from the site, but there was no guarantee for her safety after. Besides, Angela knowing Kamilah's name made Fareeha feel threatened. This stranger knew about her family. What else did she know? What were Angela's intentions other than to 'watch over' her?

Fareeha flexed her jaw, then came to a decision.

"You were a hostage of the terrorists. They were planning to use you as a bargaining chip for their lives. You are now under my charge, and I will bring you to the General after my mission is ended. Until then, you are not to say anything to anyone. Understood?"

Angela nodded, then followed close behind Fareeha as they alighted the VTOL.

Ana listened to Fareeha's story, then Angela's. She was the perfect picture of calm and attentiveness as she sat behind the wooden table, in the makeshift office they had set up in the city hall. Fingers steepled, she held Angela's gaze with barely a blink – even when her wife's name was mentioned – and kept silent long after the blonde was done talking. Fareeha sat in a chair next to Angela's. The soldier still wore her combat armour, but was without her weapons – she had been relieved of them before stepping into the General's office. She looked at her mother, hoping that she could somehow make sense of all this.

"Fareeha." Ana stretched a hand towards her, palm facing upwards. "Your pendant."

With a soldier's obedience, Fareeha took off the chain around her neck and set it in Ana's hand. The older woman held both the tags and pendant in her palm, running a thumb over the crystal.

"You're right," she said, looking back up at Angela. "Kamilah did give Fareeha this pendant." Ana glanced down at said pendant again, then closed her fingers over it. "Because she wants to speak to you."

"*What?*" Fareeha leaned forward in her seat, but was forbidden from further outburst by Ana's raised hand.

"She knows," Angela said quietly.

Ana nodded. "Two years ago, after Fareeha's mission in Siberia. Although, it is more accurate to say that she *suspected*." She wound the chain around her knuckles, and let the pendant hang from her hand. "But it was a strong enough hunch. She went to great lengths to acquire this crystal."

"I'm sure. This crystal does not exist in your realm. She would have had to return to..."

"I know." Ana's gaze dropped, growing darker as it rested on the pendant once more. "You're able to repress memories of your existence, correct?"

"Yes, but the crystal is negating my powers."

"I know how to stop the nullifying magic long enough for you to escape. But I will only do so, if you agree to wipe everyone's memory of you – other than mine and Fareeha's. And you will appear before us again in four days – Saturday."

"Understood."

Ana scrutinised Angela for a moment more, then uttered, "*Nexim ark'ha nox*."

Angela's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Your pronunciation is perfect."

"My wife is a very good teacher."

"So it seems."

With that, tranquil golden light enveloped Angela, and then she was gone. Fareeha was left staring at the empty chair with more questions than she had started with. She looked at Ana pointedly.

"Not now, Fareeha. It is best that your mother tells you."

"Tells me *what*? How does mama know she even existed? What is going on?" Frustration burned in her chest, stoked brighter by the fact that she knew it would find no outlet just yet.

"You will know soon," Ana said. "We'll take leave this weekend and go home. You'll get your answers then."

"Ami—"

"Not now, Fareeha," she repeated patiently. "Besides, I don't think I even understand half of what is going on." She looked at her daughter sympathetically. "I know how confused you are right now. But you just have to wait for a few more days, alright?"

Ana had dropped the General's tone, and reverted back to the soothing timbre of a mother. Whether intentional or instinctive, it was unclear. But it worked.

"Fine," Fareeha sighed, rising from her seat. She was moving towards the door when Ana spoke.

"You did well out there today, little one."

Tossing a smile over, she replied, "Not as well as you, General. I'm sure Target Alpha didn't even see you coming."

"Of course. I'm a sniper. No one sees me coming." She cocked her head. "Except your—"

"Alright!" Fareeha yelled, throwing her hands up. "I'm out."

She heard Ana chuckle as she escaped through the wooden double doors. Then—

"Wait, you forgot your tags!"

Fareeha tilted her head and craned her neck forward, in a perfect demonstration of the dramatic flair she inherited from Ana.

"Come again?"

Kamilah's mouth curved gently in a smile. "I was once a Sentinel."

The youngest Amari pressed her lips together. She stared at Kamilah in silence, then turned her head to subject Ana to the same scrutiny. Both women returned her gaze steadily, giving no hint that they were somehow pulling off a very elaborate prank.

But just to make sure, Fareeha asked, "You're not kidding?"

"No."

She narrowed her eyes and finally gave up. Fareeha leant back in her armchair, still watching her mothers sitting in the couch adjacent to her. She cast her eyes briefly around the apartment, wondering if she was stuck in a dream. They were in Zürich, where they had bought a house in addition to the one in Giza. Since all three worked for Enyo – with the exception of Kamilah, who had retired three years back – they had moved to Switzerland for the sake of convenience. Though the colder weather took some time getting used to, it was worth getting to spend more time together as family.

Fareeha ran those simple facts through her mind. They were clear, concise, and matter-of-fact. She was awake. Scratching her temple, she asked, "So, why are you 'once' a Sentinel?"

"I broke a rule, and disobeyed orders. You see," Kamilah said, straightening herself. "Sentinels are supposed to be guardians. They would watch over one human during the lifetime they achieved an exceptional feat. And after the human dies of natural causes, the Sentinel would then be assigned to another human. To ensure a smooth transition from one charge to another, a rule was implemented: no Sentinel is to develop attachments to their charge."

"But you're protecting them. For their entire life. Surely you'll come to like your charge? Maybe?"

"Of course. Liking the human would make the job less tedious. But the problem comes when you like the human *too* much."

"So you got attached to someone?"

"Yes." Kamilah turned to her wife, touching her cheek. "I got attached to this one."

"I was too charming." Ana grinned when she received a pinch.

"I still don't see the problem," Fareeha declared, before the two could get too absorbed in each other.

The smile on Kamilah's face faded. She dropped the hand back into her lap. "The problem comes when you value one human's life over everything else." She sighed. "It's a long story. Simply put, a crisis happened while I was assigned to Ana. A deluge of chaotic energy from the Sentinel's realm broke through the barrier that separates this world and theirs. It wreaked havoc on the reincarnation cycle. Souls were getting lost and going mad, being corrupted and destroyed, or entering wrong hosts."

"During that time, the Sentinels' duties to their humans were suspended, and I was forced to leave Ana's side. But while we were trying to subdue a large wave of mad souls attacking humans, Ana got trapped by a group of them while trying to save others. So I abandoned my task and went to her rescue." Her voice grew quieter. "Eleven Sentinels and countless other humans died because I broke ranks. After the crisis had ended, the Council decided that I should be punished. I was stripped of all magic, and sentenced to live and be reborn as a human for eternity."

"That doesn't sound so bad." Fareeha nodded at Ana. "That just means you get to be with ami forever."

Kamilah laughed softly. "No, my dear. It is a punishment for a reason. Unlike normal humans, I remember all that I have been through. And I have lived more lifetimes without your ami, than I have with her." She glanced at her wife, and held her hand. "There were lives where she fell in love with another. Where she hated me. Where I died by her hand. Some lives, I couldn't find her and went insane. This?" Kamilah gestured at them. "Where we are married and have you...it has been few and far between."

"Is there no way to end this punishment?"

"No. 'Eternity', remember?"

Fareeha pondered over the story for a while. That explained why she was so attached to Ana, at least. But...

"What does this have to do with my Sentinel? Why do you want to speak to her?"

Kamilah watched her silently.

"Because this is not the only lifetime I've noticed her presence around you."

Fareeha choked on her waffles when Angela materialised without warning during breakfast the next morning. The Sentinel set a hand on her convulsing shoulder while Ana patted her back, until Kamilah brought a glass of water that Fareeha gulped down with difficulty. Her face reddened slightly when she finally managed to calm down.

"You could've given us a warning, you know," Fareeha muttered, coughing into her hand.

Angela smiled down at her, hand lifting from her shoulder but dropping before it reached her cheek. She lifted her gaze to look at—

"Kamilah," she greeted. Angela started to bow with a hand over her heart, but Kamilah stopped her.

"No. I'm not one of you anymore." She smiled gently at Angela as her hand was lowered. "I recognise you. You were still in training when I last saw you."

"Yes. And I've seen you only a few times before..."

Kamilah nodded, gaze lowering. Taking a short breath, she asked, "Would you like some waffles? We still have some in the kitchen."

Fareeha blinked, glancing at her mother incredulously. Then she looked back at Angela, catching a glimpse of blue eyes before they were jerked away from her. The blonde shifted on her feet uncertainly.

"I...would rather speak to you first."

"Alright." Kamilah picked up her cup. "Would you like some tea then?"

Angela shook her head. "Thank you."

Fareeha caught her mother's arm as she rounded the table. The older woman gave her a small smile, then patted her cheek fondly.

"It's just a talk, little one."

Angela stepped into the living room's balcony, taking in a breath of fresh air to calm herself as she looked at the beautiful lake in the distance. She kept her eyes on the city sprawled out along the edge of the lake, acutely aware of the *click* when Kamilah locked the sliding doors behind them.

"You wanted to speak to me." Angela turned to face the older woman, her tea's aroma making a pass under her nostrils.

Kamilah nodded and sat in a chair, gesturing at the other in silent invitation. The blonde took her place in it, watching Kamilah take a slow sip of her drink. She must be...62 now. Angela had seen her in almost every lifetime where she had guarded Fareeha, but it was still disquieting to see the woman bear white hair and wrinkles on her skin. A Sentinel was immortal. They did not age. It was...sobering.

"I've noticed you around Fareeha for a few lives now."

"Yes."

"Why?"

She clasped her hands together, eyes turned downward. "It is my sentence."

"To watch over Fareeha."

Angela nodded.

"Let me guess: for eternity."

A humourless smile. "Although my sentence is much lighter than yours."

"So it is. It must be much easier to still have magic at your disposal. Though it surprises me the Council showed leniency."

She looked at the Egyptian. "After you were cast down, there was an uproar. Many said your sentence is too harsh."

"Oh?"

"Yes. They believe that your punishment is just, but its length is too much."

Kamilah chuckled, low and cynical. "And yet the Council still has not revoked my punishment."

"They cannot afford to appear weak-willed now, can they?" Angela returned her smile. "But they have gone...easier on later offenders. Technically speaking."

"And for you, that means retaining your status as a Sentinel."

"That, and—" Angela hesitated. "They have given me a way to end my punishment."

"What do you have to do?"

"There is nothing I can do...but persuade. The only one who holds the power to free me is Fareeha."

Kamilah regarded her silently. "Do I want to know the details?"

"Does it matter?" Angela sighed, feeling the burden of countless failed attempts hovering over her. "What Fareeha has to do goes against her nature. They might as well have not given me a way out."

"Do you want a way out?"

The soft words caught Angela's attention immediately. She turned to look into dark brown eyes, seeing for the first time the exhaustion from over three millennia of suffering. Angela had only been through a third of that, and already felt utterly drained. How could this woman still keep sane, she wondered.

"I..." She started out certain, but her next words wavered into nothingness. "I..."

"You can't bear to leave her."

Angela closed her eyes at the simple statement of fact. The truth rang so soundly it almost became an accusation.

"I understand," Kamilah said gently. She laid a hand on Angela's shoulder. "During the first few lifetimes, I thought it was worth it if I could be with Ana again."

"It would not be a punishment if you could be with them, or just ensure that they are well," Angela supplied, receiving a light pat.

"But then you realise it is most painful when they are happy and well...without you. It makes you doubt. Makes you wonder if all this pain is worth it."

"It is like an addiction, is it not?" Angela said. "You are ready to give up when you suffer countless cycles without them. But when you spend one life with them like you've always wished for, you think you are ready to go through anything to be with them again."

"Took the words right out of my mouth." Kamilah smiled. She glanced down at her cup as though suddenly remembering it was there, and took a long draught of lukewarm tea.

"Do you want a way out?" Angela punted the question back.

"Yes." Kamilah's answer was ready. Decisive. "Angela. Right now, what I wish for the most, is to spend one good lifetime with Ana and Fareeha. Just one. Then never have to come back again."

"The only way you can do that without a pardon from the Council is if...you destroy your own soul." The last few words came out slowly as suspicion snuck into her mind. "Is that why you wanted to speak to me?"

"No," Kamilah replied quickly. "I couldn't ask you to commit another crime now, could I?" She laughed gently at Angela's relieved yet still wary expression. Then she sighed, "What if I told you I'm looking into a way to sever my soul's bond to the Aether?"

The Aether. The source of magic, and where all souls would return after their bodies passed, to be guided back into the world in new hosts. "That would mean no Sentinel would be able to exert influence on you. But that would also mean your soul will be trapped in this world after death. You'd go mad."

Kamilah stared into her half-empty cup, face blank. "Madness would be a welcome escape from this hell."

"You have decided then?"

The human snorted. "No." She turned her head to look through the glass doors, where Ana and Fareeha could be seen trying to snatch the remnants of each other's waffles. "As you've said, it is an addiction. It is difficult to break free, and I still don't have the courage to do so. But I... I am getting tired, Angela. I don't know how much longer I can take this."

Angela rested a hand on her arm, getting a smile in return.

"What about you? Do you want to live like this forever?"

"I...don't know."

"Would you be interested in having an option then? In case you change your mind in the future." Kamilah straightened herself, looking purposeful.

Angela would be lying if she said she had never thought of it. But the idea of living without Fareeha, the idea of living alone when she existed, always made her recoil from the possibility.

But then again...

She examined Kamilah, wondering if she could endure even half of this woman went through. Logic asserted itself over the tangle of emotion.

"It would be nice to have a choice."

"Then I'd like to ask for your help. My research is not making much headway because I am cut off from your realm, and thus the texts I need. I need you to help me acquire them, and perhaps some materials for experiments."

"But how will I contact you? I am tied to Fareeha, and unable to see you in other lifetimes."

Kamilah gave a self-satisfied smirk and, for a brief moment, appeared more youthful. "I have that handled, don't worry. Now, I haven't asked: what was it you did to warrant this punishment?"

The Sentinel seemed to be keeping a purposeful distance from her. Angela was always polite, and had taken to having long conversations with Kamilah – who invited her to stay with the family through the weekend. Visibly, of course. Not in her usual mysterious Sentinel way. But she seemed to only stay in Fareeha's vicinity for as long as she was needed, before scooting out of sight.

It was odd. She got along with Ana just fine. When it came to Fareeha though, she kept her replies succinct and never kept eye contact long after she stopped talking. Which was even stranger after Fareeha caught the blonde staring at her when Angela thought she was not looking, only to have the quiet gaze jerk away when noticed. These moments brought some amusement when little motes of light gathered around Angela before disappearing abruptly, as though the Sentinel had tried to vanish instinctively. Sometimes a bonus would appear in the form of a faint blush across the woman's cheeks as she turned away and stared at something else.

It was a little endearing. Strange, but endearing. Like the look of surprise at the mug Fareeha held out to her.

"Hot chocolate is my favourite way of fighting the cold," she said, inching the mug closer to the blonde. With perfect timing, the cold afternoon breeze streamed through the balcony – which seemed to be Angela's favourite spot in the house.

Blue eyes searched her face quietly, then a faint smile appeared on Angela's face. She took the mug in both hands and looked at the little marshmallows floating at the top.

"You've always had–" She stopped abruptly, cutting short the words that seemed to have come involuntarily.

"Always had what?" Fareeha sat in the chair next to Angela's, bringing her own mug up for a sip.

Angela kept her eyes down. "A sweet tooth," she said finally.

"I guess you'd know all about me, huh. After all that time you spent 'by my side'?" She gave a light-hearted grin when Angela looked up at her, and felt a small measure of success when she got a smile in return.

"You could say that. Although reincarnations vary, there are still some characteristics that remain constant."

"Oh? So what are my constants?"

"Your sweet tooth is one. And you're always strong, idealistic, charming."

"'Charming'?"

Angela's smile wavered a little, then recovered. "You always get that tattoo, no matter if Ana is alive or—" Another abrupt pause.

Fareeha felt an urge to dig deeper, but decided against it. At times, ignorance truly was bliss. And bliss was what she wanted to feel now. Although...

"My mother said you've been with me for a while." Angela nodded. "And that it's a punishment." Another nod. "But she never told me what you did."

"I asked her not to." Angela drank a mouthful of hot chocolate while Fareeha waited for an answer. She chewed slowly on the marshmallows. "If you had to know, I should be the one to tell you."

"And...are you going to tell me?"

"Do you want to know?"

Something in Angela's tone said *'no'*, but Fareeha went on with, 'Yes.'

The blonde's gaze softened. "Another constant: you always want to know."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Depends on how you take it."

"Then let us see."

Angela studied her with a placid gaze. Then she sighed and spoke with a level, practiced tone. "I was assigned to you in another world, where swords and magic existed."

"Wait—," Fareeha interrupted. "*'Magic'?*" she repeated incredulously, uncertain laughter bubbling up when Angela nodded. "Are you just pulling my leg now?"

"No." A fond smile. "Other realities do exist. This—" Angela nodded towards the scenery. "—is not the only one." She quirked a brow when Fareeha still appeared dubious. "Fareeha, you've watched me appear out of thin air."

Heaving a sigh, Fareeha waved a hand at her. "Alright. Please continue."

"You were a knight under your mother's command – she was a field marshal. You—"

"What was my weapon?"

"A glaive."

"Cool."

Angela gave a conceding nod. "With that glaive and armour, you were—" She caught herself, eyes darting away for a second. "You were very fearsome."

"I don't suppose you have pictures?"

"No," Angela drawled with a small smile on her face. "You earned a Sentinel's protection by

breaking a siege on your kingdom's capital city. It was because of your victory that the invaders were eventually driven out of your lands. You became a hero to your people."

"That sounds amazing."

"It was. They loved you. Often showered you with gifts."

"Almost makes me wish I could experience it. You know, again."

"You don't want to." Angela's gaze dropped, and she turned towards the front. "When you were a little over 40 years of age, you suffered from a disease. It was rare and magical in nature. Your body started degenerating, and no matter how many healers or mages were brought in, no one could find a cure."

"So that's when you did something?"

"Yes. Skilled as the healers and mages were, they had not the ability to see what I could – your soul was disintegrating, little by little. Chaotic energy had somehow latched onto you, and was breaking you apart from within. I sought help from other Sentinels, but was ordered not to interfere. It was a 'natural cause', you see," she explained, glancing up briefly. "And though they said they were looking into its effects on your soul, I knew they would not have a cure in time to save you. Even if they did, I was unsure if they would intervene before you were gone. So I took...desperate measures."

"I could not heal or hold your soul together with my magic alone. So I used displaced souls – those that have left their mortal bodies and are returning to the Aether – to reinforce yours. It worked for a while. But your condition worsened, and I had to start using more and more of the displaced to keep you together."

"That's not good, is it? Something about a 'natural order' and everything..."

"Yes. I sacrificed numerous souls just to keep you alive, and it caused an imbalance in other realities. Those who should have reincarnated did not, and several civilisations were kept in turmoil longer than anticipated."

"So you were caught."

"Not yet. I was caught after I lost you." Her voice grew quieter, but continued in a defeated tone. "I used too many souls to hold yours together. Their energies started conflicting with one another, and you started to lose your sense of self. Eventually, you went insane and tried to kill me."

"Please tell me I failed."

"You did. I was forced to kill you before you could harm anyone."

"Understandable."

Angela closed her eyes. "I was found out and dragged before the Council. They examined your soul and found out what I had done. I was stripped of my abilities until they found a way to piece your soul back together. Then they sentenced me to watch over you forever."

"I see," Fareeha said. The blonde's head was tilted downward, face still blank in contemplation. "I have a question."

Blue eyes reopened and focused on her. "Yes?"

"Why didn't you let me go? I would've been reincarnated anyway, right?"

"I couldn't bear the thought of being parted from you after. And seeing you wasting away... I just..." She wavered and stopped.

Fareeha allowed her a few minutes to gather herself. Then she said gently, "My mother said she became too attached to her charge. She loved ami, and it drove her to do what she did." She let the words settle, watching a faint hint of tension enter Angela's features.

"Was it the same for you?"

A pause. Then—

"I'm sorry."

Angela vanished in a burst of light.

Fareeha blinked the spots out of her eyes, mouth still open in an unfinished attempt at a plea for Angela to stay. She sighed, then drank from her cup of now-lukewarm chocolate. Then she blinked, and looked over at the table and chair.

Huh. Angela took the hot chocolate with her.

"I'm sorry."

Fareeha started, nearly dropping her tablet onto the kitchen floor. Hugging the device to her chest, she spun around to find Angela standing behind her.

"You could've given some warning, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Now that's the third time you've said that. Relax." Fareeha smiled to put her at ease. When Angela stayed put, she continued, "So why'd you apologise just before you scared me half to death?"

"I left without an explanation. It was rude of me."

"Ah. Well, to be fair, I *was* probing a little deeply. I thought you left because you were angry or something. But sorry if I—"

"No, it is alright," Angela cut in. "I was...just avoiding the question."

"So I guess you're ready to give an answer now?"

"I did love you. And I acted selfishly because of that. You suffered much longer than you had to because I couldn't bear to let you go peacefully."

Fareeha tapped a finger idly on the edge of her tablet. "Was the feeling mutual? I mean, did we..."

"Yes."

"Ah," Fareeha repeated. One question sat on her tongue, but at the set in Angela's jaw, she decided to keep it down. She clasped onto Angela's shoulder instead, feeling it stiffen under her hand. "How about we leave the heavy stuff behind for now, hm? I have—"

The microwave's *beep* interrupted her. She held up a finger, and hurried over to pull out the overnight lasagne.

"Want some?" she asked, walking past Angela to set it on the counter. "Ami managed to burn the corners somehow, but it's still good."

"No, thank you."

"Alright then, why don't you sit down?" Fareeha hopped onto a chair and patted the one next to her. "I spent the night thinking and I've a few questions to ask." She raised her brows at Angela expectantly, and wore a wry grin when the woman took the seat.

"Great. Now, first question: is that—" She pointed at Angela's clothes – which were still the same white top and black jeans. "Your uniform?"

Angela laughed softly. "No. We wear whatever that will help us blend into the world we are assigned."

"What, so you have to go clothes shopping whenever you get a new charge?"

"No," the blonde drawled. She plucked at her own sleeve. "We conjure the clothes up ourselves."

"Magic clothes. Now I wish I had your powers."

"You'd rather not."

"Hm. Point taken." Fareeha poked her fork into the lasagne and savoured a bite. "So what can you do, exactly? Like with your magic? Other than teleporting, that is."

"I can heal non-fatal wounds. But for life-threatening ones, I can...*alter* them so they would be less severe. Like what I did for you. I can also use a little combat magic, but that is not my specialty." She drummed her fingers on the countertop. "It was your mother's, incidentally."

"Oh? And what does she do, fight people for ami?"

"In a manner of speaking. She would weaken humans so that Ana could have the upper hand in combat. When others tried to harm her charge, she could deflect the blows and give Ana time to react."

Fareeha gave a sudden bark of laughter. "So technically, ami was cheating?"

Angela mirrored her smile, eyes carrying a warm glint of mirth. It looked good on her.

Wait—no... Fareeha caught herself, staring at her companion with the smile still plastered on her face. She prayed Angela could not read minds as well.

"Well," Angela replied, apparently not catching onto her lapse. "You could call it a...well-earned advantage."

"That's a nice way of putting it." Fareeha dug into her food, satisfying her growling stomach in silence. Angela leaned both elbows on the counter, keeping her eyes closed as Fareeha demolished about half the dish. She twirled the fork idly between her fingers, then turned back to the Sentinel.

"So...you've been around my entire life."

"'Entire'?"

"You know. Have you seen me in diapers? Please tell me you haven't seen me in diapers."

Angela shook her head. "No. My watch starts when you turn 26 – that's the age when you earned my protection, a long time ago. Before that, I cannot sense your presence at all."

"Oh. Well, that's a relief." Fareeha poked the fork back into the lasagne. "Mind if I asked something a little more serious?"

"Yes?"

"Is there any way to end your punishment?"

Angela kept still, then slowly opened her eyes. Her gaze stayed forward until it shifted towards Fareeha, who grew a little restless under the prolonged scrutiny.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I asked, didn't I?" Fareeha said, albeit a little slower. She returned Angela's stare, then her eyes lowered to watch the Sentinel turn a palm up. Harsh motes of electric blue light swirled, then coalesced into a sheathed dagger.

Cocking her head, Fareeha looked over the black metallic sheath embossed with intricate gold patterns coiling up from its bottom edge. The dagger's grip bore the same golden material as well, though its guard and pommel matched the black sheath. She raised her brows when Angela offered the hilt to her. At the Sentinel's nod, she wrapped her fingers around it tentatively, feeling the faint pulse of energy within the finely-crafted metal. Then Angela pulled the sheath away, revealing a simple polished blade gleaming under the kitchen lights.

Fareeha held up the blade for closer inspection, not doubting that it could slice off her fingers if she was careless. The longer she looked at it, the deeper the sense of foreboding grew. So she decided to fight it down.

"Don't tell me it involves some kind of blood ritual?" she joked. Her smile fell away at Angela's grave expression. Slim fingers wrapped around hers and tugged gently, until the tip of the blade rested gently against Angela's chest, over her heart. Fareeha's blood ran cold.

"Plunge this dagger through my heart, and I will be free." The steadiness in her voice was unsettling.

Mouth dry, Fareeha asked, "Won't this kill you? Can Sentinels die?"

"We have our own cycle of rebirth if we are killed. But this dagger—" Angela's fingers tightened over her hand. "—will dissipate my soul, and send it to merge with the Chaos."

"Isn't the 'Chaos' what reigns over death and...?"

"Yes."

"So you *will* die."

"Yes."

Her hand grew weak under the firm grip. Fareeha swallowed, acutely aware of the accelerated beat in her chest. "Do you...want to?"

"My life will end when you so choose. I have accepted that."

"But do you *want* to?"

Angela held her searching gaze steadily. Then – perplexingly – a tight smile curved her lips. "I don't know."

The utter flatness in the Sentinel's eyes was unsettling. Fareeha glanced down at the dagger digging lightly into white fabric, and pulled her hand – along with the dagger – away from Angela's grasp. What was even more disturbing, Fareeha realised, was how the dagger felt; like it *belonged* in her hand. Like it was made for her.

She set the blade down on the countertop, jerking her hand away and watching silently as Angela sheathed it again. Her movements were precise, as if she had done it many times before. Fareeha's heart clenched at the thought.

"Angela..."

"I would be lying if I said killing me is not an act of mercy," the blonde said, holding the blade in her hand before it blinked out of existence. "But I will not beg you to release me. I will watch over you for as long as you wish."

"That means *I* am the one keeping you trapped here. I'm prolonging your sentence."

A humourless smile hung on Angela's lips. Her hand moved across the countertop, but stopped just short of touching Fareeha's. It curled lightly into a fist.

"You should finish your food before it grows cold."

"Wait–"

Too late. Angela was gone.

Her guardian did not reappear for the rest of the day, even after her parents returned from their little trip downtown. She was halfway through packing her bags when informed by Ana that their leave had been extended for an entire week. The questioning quirk of her brows was answered with a challenging grin on Ana's lips, but Fareeha decided not to look the gift horse in the mouth and enjoy her break. Or at least try to.

Fareeha had recounted her conversation with Angela for the entire day. Each repetition brought her understanding a little deeper, made her wonder what Angela had gone through, and engraved in her mind the choice she had. It was nearly suffocating at first, that horrible burden. Her quieter disposition drew concern from one mother, and sympathetic glances from the other. Part of her wished that Angela would stop escaping before they could hash everything out. But then again, it was not really a choice, was it? She could not see herself holding that dagger and...

She halted abruptly at the end of the hallway, taking a breath and shaking her head as if to dislodge the image. It could wait until the next time Angela chose to appear. For now, she should just live her life as per normal.

Fareeha strode through the living room quietly, towards the corner sofa where her parents had fallen asleep. She drew the curtains closed as she passed, and tapped on the remote lying on the table, shutting off the television. Unfolding the blanket she held in one arm, she draped it over the slumbering women and froze when Ana stirred. But the sniper merely turned her head to rest on her wife's, and her arm around Kamilah shifted a little before she fell back to sleep. Smiling,

Fareeha pulled the blanket gently up to their shoulders and drew back.

Lingering by the sofa, she briefly wondered if Ana could make the choice she had. Wondered if she could go through with the deed and...

Sighing, Fareeha stopped herself again. She dragged a hand down her face as she went over to switch off the lights. Maybe she would be able to think clearer after good night's sleep. Maybe.

Focusing on the dark threads of mist in the slash wounds, Angela wove her magic through the cuts, healing gold pushing out menacing black. The vapour hung over the man's abdomen before it was bound by a ring of light and dispelled. With the chaotic energy gone, Angela poured her magic into the patient's body, synchronising with his own stream of life energy, and wove his wounds closed without trouble. Drawing her hands back, she nodded, and the man sat up as though he was never injured.

"Thank you," Jack rumbled.

"It's no trouble." Angela rose to her feet, watching him swing his legs down from the couch and pull on the ruined black t-shirt.

She was back in Sanctuary, the realm where Sentinels resided and stood vigil over the different realities – a calm island in an undulating sea. It was their home, and was not unlike mortal communities. Each Sentinel had their own cozy little houses in the city. There were training schools for those newly reborn, a magnificent town hall where the Council convened, and a feast hall where Sentinels would gather to indulge in food if they feel so inclined.

What Angela enjoyed most about her home was the eclectic collection of clothing fashions. Many Sentinels preferred sticking to clothes appropriate for the world they currently served in, so one could see normal tops and jeans like Angela's and Jack's, or long flowing robes adorned by garish jewelry, sleek formfitting materials that boasted their owners' musculature, cybernetic implants, and in some cases, full suits of leather or even steel armour.

Belatedly, she gave thanks that Jack was not wearing any sort of armour. It would have made her job a little more troublesome.

"Jack," Angela said when the man stood. His carefully blank expression fell a little at the edges. "You can't keep hurting yourself like that."

"I didn't cut myself repeatedly on purpose, Angela."

"You know what I mean."

She watched his jaw work silently. Then the man bent down to pick up his jacket.

"He is my responsibility," Jack said curtly.

"He is not. He has not been for the past six centuries."

"I should have been there during the accident—"

"Because you had a charge to protect, Jack. Gabriel would understand." The man's shoulders stiffened at the name. "There is no point in trying to bring him back. His magic, his energy, his very *soul* has been corrupted by the Chaos. He can't even recognise you anymore—"

"And what would you have me do, Angela!" Jack exploded at her. He gritted his teeth together as

he tried to calm down. "Let him wander the mortal realms and destroy even more souls?"

"You should allow the Council to step in. They can help to end Gabriel's misery."

"No. I have to be the one—"

"You're still too attached to him, Jack. You need to let go—"

"Oh?" He cut in. "Are we giving advice on letting go now? Tell me, how is Farah doing? Is that her name this time? Or is it Fareeha again?"

She watched Jack's shoulders rise and fall as he took deep breaths, glaring at her with a downturned mouth. "You know I don't have a choice in that," she reminded him quietly.

The crease between his brows deepened, and he yanked his gaze away from her. He went to open the front door, where he paused. "Thanks for the help," he muttered before stepping out, shutting the door behind him.

Angela stood unmoving on the spot, then slowly sat down in the armchair behind her. She rested her head in one hand, feeling a dull throb grow between her temples.

She had only been through eleven lives with Fareeha, but had experienced enough to tell where things were going in this lifetime.

Angela had returned to Fareeha's side the next afternoon, and found herself still in the Amari's home. The welcome she received was warm, as though she had been accepted as a family friend already. She still kept an imperceptible distance from them – excluding Kamilah – out of a habit born of a millennium's experience. Despite this – or perhaps because of this – Fareeha started inching closer to her.

Tentatively at first – and though she managed to hide most of it, Angela could still see the guilt and pressure simmering beneath the surface. Fareeha had no memory of their first encounter, their affair, nor the pain she went through under Angela's desperate care, and yet still carried its burden simply through knowledge alone. Angela regretted each time she had revealed their past, but Fareeha's reaction was always a good indicator of what was to come.

There were lives where she kept up her guard and maintained either a professional relationship with Angela, or sought to spend less time with her. Then there were lives where Fareeha tried to ease Angela's troubles and become more of a friend than just a responsibility. The latter made Angela more wary. Fearful. But she could never resist Fareeha's efforts, could never stop from falling for her again.

She could never.

Fareeha used the free time she had to learn – or relearn – everything she could about Angela. Little things, like what her favourite colour was, what kind of music she enjoyed, what she did when not busy trying to stop Fareeha from reincarnating prematurely. Then she would turn it around into a little game, asking Angela to share what she knew about her charge after each question. It was easy enough – Fareeha had a pool of quirks that would differ each time around, and it was a simple matter of elimination.

"You enjoy skydiving. Especially when you are in free fall – it gives you a feeling of freedom. Makes you feel as if you're flying."

"Right," Fareeha said, resting both hands in her coat pockets. She looked over at Angela, who

strolled next to her down a street in Altstadt. The soldier had convinced her to go for a walk, with the Sentinel keeping herself visible to humans. "Now, my turn. Do you have wings?"

Angela quirked a brow at her. "Because I'm your 'guardian angel'?"

"Yes...?"

"No, I don't." She smiled at the faint blush on Fareeha's cheeks. It was familiar, oh so familiar. "But I am able to conjure a pair should I feel like it."

"Can you fly?"

"For as long as my magic lasts."

"So you don't necessarily need wings."

"No."

Fareeha fell into silent contemplation.

"You want me to take you on a flight."

"Uh–, well," Fareeha stammered, sheepish grin on her face as she scratched the back of her head. "I mean, it's just a thought. I don't really... You can't waste your magic on whims, right?" She looked at Angela expectantly, but a serene smile was all she got as an answer. "Yeah. Wait, how'd you know what I wanted? Have I asked before?"

"Many times."

"Ah. Seems I'm a rather predictable person."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing."

Angela indulged in the softening curve of Fareeha's embarrassed smile. She glanced up, breath catching at the warm undertone in the woman's gaze, and promptly turned away. Keeping her eyes on the cobblestone street, Angela folded her arms loosely, realising history was starting to repeat itself.

And she wanted it to.

Back in the Amari's balcony again, Angela stood by the parapet and stared at the pendant on her palm. Kamilah had given it to her – she had removed the nullifying magic and repurposed it for communication. Angela could use it to send and receive telepathic messages, and locate Kamilah with ease. To help her concoct the escape plan.

She had been warned that it may not be completed within this lifetime. That it would be a commitment through the next few. Angela had just given a smile and promised to aid Kamilah however she can. How could she not? It was an act of compassion at the very least, and at most a bold statement to make against the powers that be, who had cast them into this suffering. Their endeavour might not even succeed in the end. But it was nice to have hope again.

Angela turned at the sound of the door sliding open, and saw Fareeha stepping out to join her. The soldier leaned both hands against the parapet, gazing out into the night. They stayed like that in silence for a while, before Fareeha spoke.

"There's something I want to know for certain."

"Yes?"

Fingers drummed against metal. Then a deep breath. "Your dagger. The one that I can use to break your bond. Do you want me to use it?"

"If I wanted you to, would you?"

"I—" Fareeha bit her lip. "I *would* consider it if you really..."

"You wouldn't." Angela smiled faintly at the surprised blink. "Would you believe that we've come close to using the dagger once?" Fareeha raised her brows. "Yes. In one life, where we were just friends. You held the dagger over my heart for so long. But in the end, you threw it aside and said you couldn't do it."

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Angela sighed. "It is what the Council had counted on when they set the terms. They knew it is not in your nature, and took advantage of it."

"I'm *really* predictable."

"Consistent." Her smile widened when Fareeha clicked her tongue. Angela laid a hand on her arm. "Don't worry about it anymore. I don't think you would ever go through with it in this life." She shrugged. "Unless you come to hate me in the future."

"It will never come to that."

Fareeha's hand felt so comforting over hers, she almost believed.

No, she *did* believe.

Fareeha had taken to talking to Angela while going about her life. It was cute and certainly made her job much more interesting and funny, but she worried that it might earn Fareeha a reputation for being off her rocker. The thing was, though Fareeha knew she was talking to Angela, no one else did. To an outsider, Major Fareeha Amari was as good as talking and snickering to herself. Angela had to give her a few pokes in the back when a few colleagues stared at her, and remind Fareeha in person that Angela was invisible to others, so that the soldier could check herself more closely.

And the soldier did, thankfully. Mostly she had reduced it to near-inaudible muttering, though when alone she would still speak as if Angela was still in the room next to her. On missions though, the Major kept her little indulgence under a tight lid.

Angela swung her legs lightly from her perch on the café's balcony railing, watching Fareeha give a pep talk to her squad in the London street below. The customers at the table right behind Angela were blissfully unaware of her presence, and craning their necks to look out for the incoming convoy.

"Angie!"

'Angie' jumped, turning her head to look at the wide grin and garish mop of spiky green hair.

"Genji," she greeted her fellow Sentinel who was crouched on the railing beside her. "You scared

me."

"One point for the ninja." He pumped his arm comically, then swung his legs down to sit beside Angela. The man still wore his ninja getup – complete with the katana and shuriken. He had taken a shine to it since Angela first knew him, and refused to wear anything else to adapt to his assigned world. Genji was dedicated. Stubborn, but dedicated. "Your human is here too, huh? What's her name again, Faree? Faree...mah? Fatimah? I know it starts with a 'Fa'..."

"Fareeha."

"That's it!" He snapped his fingers. "I knew that."

Angela smiled as Fareeha's squad dispersed to their posts, and the Major took her position near the stage. "Is yours here as well?"

"Yep. Tekhartha Zenyatta, disciple of Tekhartha Mondatta. He's a pretty cool guy. You'll see."

As if on cue, two vans came into view. The crowds gathered on the streets grew wild as the vans rumbled down the road, and finally came to a stop near the stages. Enyo personnel alighted from the van behind, and quickly gathered around the one in front, forming a protective guard around Mondatta as the monk stepped out of the van, closely followed by Zenyatta. Both wore serene smiles on their faces as they bowed their heads towards the chanting crowds, and moved over to the stage to start the speech.

Genji nudged Angela unnecessarily. "There! See, he's cool, right."

"Yes, he is," Angela played along, even though Zenyatta merely stood behind Mondatta as the senior monk spoke into the mic.

"Kinda good looking too." He raised his brows when Angela shot him a look. "What? It's true. And he's really calm. So calm that I almost admire it." He winked at the blonde, who sighed and turned her attention back to the crowd, only to have it dragged away again by a tight grip on her arm.

"Shit," Genji muttered, pointing out a dark-clothed group moving through the crowd.

Angela tensed at the sight.

"I'm off." Genji set his feet on the railing again. "See you on the other side, Angie." He did not wait for a reply and leapt gracefully to the street lamp, making his way over to Zenyatta.

Her body tensed, but she fought the instinct to warp straight to Fareeha's side. She had a good vantage point, and could see the moment—

The black-clothed figures burst through the front of the crowd, guns raised and muzzles lighting up as they sprayed the stage with hot lead. Screams erupted from the audience as they scrambled back for safety, and Mondatta's body jerked as numerous bullets shot through his body. Blood spurted across the stage floor and Zenyatta, who cried his name and threw himself onto the floor by his teacher's side. Genji slid in front of him and deflected the bullets with his katana, sending some back into the attackers, who fell under the return fire.

Two more groups appeared to the north and east of the stage, firing blindly into the crowds and littering the streets with bodies. Fareeha ran towards the northern group with her squad, while another rushed to deal with the east. Angela finally warped over to Fareeha's side, keeping herself in phase so her body would remain incorporeal and not collide with any mortals on accident. She watched as Fareeha barked an order, hefting her gun and waiting for her soldiers to part the

crowd.

Both groups opened fire at the same time, and Angela focused on keeping her charge safe – stopping bullets before they bit through Fareeha's vest or warping them away, and healing the shallow scratches on Fareeha's body. She stayed in the open as the Enyo squad dove for cover from the grenade, feeling only a vibration through the air when it went off without harming her. Another order from Fareeha, and the Enyo soldiers pushed forward to surround the attackers.

That was when one sprinted forward with dagger in hand and, faster than Fareeha could react, plunged it deep into her side.

"Fareeha!" Angela called, feeling the pain in her chest as though the blade had sunk into her instead.

Fareeha shouted a '*No!*' when she fell to the ground in a private tussle with her opponent, the rest of her squad busy with rounding the attackers up. She gave a pained yell when the man yanked the knife out, and grabbed onto his wrist when it flew down, averting the blade so it only left a long cut across her cheek instead of sinking through her head. Angela warped the dagger out of his hand, distracting him for a moment. Fareeha seized the chance to ram the front of her helmet into his nose, causing him to rear back and howl in pain. She shoved him face-first onto the paved road and sat on top of him, slamming his head into the ground to stop his attempts to buck her off. Perhaps a little too hard – the man fell unconscious.

She withdrew a flexible steel band from her belt and bent it around the man's wrists, locking mechanism clamping them together behind his back. Then Fareeha slid off onto the road next to the subdued man, bending over and clasping a hand over her wound. Angela knelt down beside her and pulled the hand gently away. She worked her magic over the bleeding wound and knitted the flesh back together, easing the tension in Fareeha's body and allowing her to breathe easier.

The soldier smiled at the hand on her cheek. "I'm fine, habibti," she murmured.

Angela froze as Fareeha peeled her hand away. Still kneeling, she watched Fareeha get back onto her feet and turn towards her squad mates, who had brought along a few captives of their own.

Was Fareeha aware of what she had said? Or was it the post-combat adrenaline?

She had not known how much she wanted to hear the endearment again. Not until she heard it lilt off Fareeha's tongue so naturally. Angela lowered her head into her palm and closed her eyes, only to be distracted by a touch on her shoulder. She looked up tiredly to find Genji standing over her with an uncharacteristically sombre look.

"Is Zenyatta alright?" she asked, grasping his proffered hand and getting back on her feet.

"Yeah. But Mondatta's gone," he said quietly. Genji shot a look back at Zenyatta, who was still kneeling by Mondatta's side. The monk had his palms pressed together, mouth moving in prayer as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Angela recognised the expression on Genji's face, sympathising with his want to comfort his charge. But there was little she could do to soothe the ache. So she held onto him instead, and allowed herself to be drawn into a tight embrace.

Kamilah cursed under her breath again, scratching out the misspelled characters with a pen. Angela looked on, taking a sip from her cup to hide the quirk of her lips, though it was unnecessary as the older woman remained focused on the leather-bound text before her.

"This would be so much easier if all this was digitised," Kamilah complained, rubbing her eyes that were exhausted from the five-hour long research. The woman had been right in predicting that the search for information alone would be tedious – Angela had been sneaking materials away for the past three months, and they still had not enough to figure out the first step, much less draw out a bare-bones plan.

"Would you like me to take over?" Angela asked, pulling the text and paper over without resistance.

"I'm getting too old for this." The Amari leaned back in her chair, heaving a sigh and reaching for her cup of tea. She was taking a long draught from it when they heard the front door being unlocked and opened. Soon enough, the soldiers walked into the living room wearily.

Ana spotted them at the dining table, eyes brightening as she made a beeline over to place a peck on her wife's lips, then steal her tea. Fareeha followed close behind her mother, smiling at Angela. She leaned over to take a look at the open text.

"Nope. Still can't read that," Fareeha announced, shaking her head.

"You could if you bothered to sit down and learn it," Angela said.

"Don't bother, Angela. This one is as bad as her mother. Can't sit still long enough."

"You didn't mention *which* mother, sweetheart."

"I think it's obvious. Isn't it, darling?"

"Mm." Ana pressed a kiss on top her head. "I love you."

"Of course you do."

"Oh come on," Fareeha groaned. "Not in front of people."

"Don't be jealous, my dear." Ana finally gave back the cup of tea, and stepped away from the table. "Now let's wash up before your mother starts nagging again."

"I don't nag," Kamilah retorted.

"Yeah. And my hair isn't white." Ana winked at her playfully, then vanished down the hallway.

Fareeha sighed and rolled her eyes, hitching her duffle bag further up her shoulder. She glanced back at Angela again, sharing a smile before she followed her mother. Angela watched her disappear, eyes lingering on the wall's corner.

"Have either of you made a move yet?"

Angela spun her head so fast she swore her neck creaked. Kamilah raised a brow as she drank her tea.

"I'll take that as a no." The woman set her cup back on the table and took a loose piece of paper with notes scribbled all over it. She read it slowly and asked, "Are you going to?"

Angela glanced at her, then focused back on the open text. "I don't know."

"You do love her, don't you?"

The pen in her hand twitched. "I do. But I don't know if I want to... You know it'll be more

difficult to let go."

"It will. But you have to take happiness where you can get it," Kamilah said softly, turning the paper over in her hands. "There's no point in turning this into a never-ending parade of masochism, is there?" She gave a wry smile when Angela glanced over at her. "Besides, you'd better decide soon. Fareeha likes you. And what she wants, she will have sooner or later. The girl is too much like her mother."

Angela laughed softly, though her heart twinged at the reminder. "Personal experience, Mrs. Amari?"

"Too personal, Ms. 'Ziegler'."

She had given in.

It was an inevitability. She knew it. Kamilah assured her of it. But it could not dispel the anxiety brewing within her. She was falling into the same cycle, falling for Fareeha all over again. Choosing to live in the moment and ignore what was sure to come, years down the road.

She was not sure what was worse: to spend one life with Fareeha, then the next few without, or to just stay hidden and let Fareeha live on without knowing she even existed. Although the latter did seem more unappealing, each time Fareeha brushed her fingers casually across her temple, to tuck a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Each time Fareeha took her by the hand and tugged, so that she would hurry forward to see what the soldier was getting excited over. Each time a strong arm would wrap around her shoulders and squeeze, as her laughter rang through the air as clearly as chimes.

Every smile and wink – whether they were correctly aimed in her direction or not – chipped away at her willpower. Every little reassurance she murmured through bloodstained lips while Angela held onto her, always made the Sentinel's heart squeeze that bit tighter. Just the sound of her name alone lilting off that graceful tongue was enough to make her want to dive off a cliff with her eyes closed.

Thankfully, there was not a cliff in sight from where they were in the Arboretum. Fareeha strolled down the paved walkway that ran along the lake, where little yachts and boats floated serenely under the few stars dotting the night sky. The soldier had her hands clasped behind her back, eyes glued to the ground before her as she took one slow step after another. Angela followed some distance away from her, ambling across trimmed grass that went untouched under her feet. She was considering taking off her shoes to feel the grass on her skin, when Fareeha stopped in her tracks. The woman turned towards the park, looking at a point some distance ahead of where the Sentinel stood.

"Angela?"

Angela strode off the grass and onto the walkway, during which Fareeha called her name again – this time looking at the position where Angela was a few seconds ago.

"Yes?"

Fareeha spun on her heel to face Angela, who was amused by how she was still surprised by Angela's sudden appearances, even though the soldier had learnt to hide it better. She shuffled on her feet, hands still clasped behind her back, as Angela waited.

"Are you..." Fareeha waved a hand up and down at her. "Are you visible? You know, to others

as well?"

"Yes. Otherwise you'd look like you're talking to no one."

"Right," she muttered, scratching her head.

"Is something wrong?" Angela asked when she fidgeted more.

"No," Fareeha replied shortly. Then she pulled her hand back down, eyes closing and taking a deep breath. She exhaled slowly, and looked back up at Angela. "There's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time." A nervous smile parted her lips. "Do you already know what it is?"

"I'd rather not guess." Anticipation sharpened her senses, tracking each pulse in her veins, each breath in her lungs, each step Fareeha took, and each step back Angela did not take.

"That's because you know." Fareeha stopped when they were nearly feet-to-feet, and Angela had to tilt her head up to keep eye contact. "Do you still love me, Angela?"

Her face was growing closer, but Angela kept still, willing herself not to fall backwards. Fingertips cooled by the sea breeze trailed gently across her wrist. "Do you?" she murmured, catching the twitch at the corners of Fareeha's lips.

"I asked you first," Fareeha whispered, tugging her close with an arm around her waist.

Angela's hand rose reflexively to rest on Fareeha's chest, feeling each rise and fall under her touch. "I do," she said in hushed confession, fingers curling over the hand grasping hers. "I have never stopped loving you."

"Good, because I've fallen for you," was the last thing she heard, before Fareeha pressed their lips softly together. Angela met her tentative touches with equal tenderness, slowly brushing away each little reservation. Hand sliding up to Fareeha's neck, Angela tugged her closer for one last, firm affirmation.

Fareeha held her in place when they parted, her arm keeping Angela where she should have always been.

One thing positive about gaining Fareeha's affection: it made her job easier.

Not easier in terms of work, that is. The soldier was exposed to danger as often as an average human was exposed to sunlight. The higher Fareeha climbed through the ranks, the busier Angela got and had to spend more time in the mortal realm; keeping a sharper eye on the woman, using her magic more often to make sure she kept breathing, forced to watch Fareeha bear each wound with a soldier's grit and press on with limps and broken bones.

Easier, because at the end of the day, Angela could hold and be held by her love, feel calming fingers smooth over her hair and hear murmurs of comfort from the soldier wrapped in bandages. Easier, because she could fall asleep and wake up to soft kisses and a smile. Easier, because she could lie beside Fareeha at night, tracing the curve of her jaw and lips, the scars on her arms and back, etching Fareeha's image into her mind, tracing over faded lines so the memory was crisp and clear once again. Easier, because she could spend as much time around Fareeha as possible, and always have two arms ready to squeeze about her waist, accompanying the teasing request for a kiss to make up for time spent apart.

Easier, because she was happy.

One thing negative about gaining Fareeha's affection: time flies by too quickly.

The thing about being immortal – one century in mortal time was but an hour to her.

In a blink of an eye, Ana had retired at her wife's urging, to spend the rest of her years sipping tea on the balcony and flying off on whimsical trips with her partner. Fareeha, wearing the beginnings of grey in her temples, took her place as Enyo's second-in-command, and yet always found time to spend with her family – Angela included.

In a blink of an eye, Fareeha wore numerous streaks of white in her hair as proudly as if they were medals of honour. Unable to register a marriage legally, she exchanged rings with Angela in a private and simple ceremony with only her parents as witness. Angela celebrated with Kamilah the first breakthrough in their research, the human managing to mask her soul's presence from Angela's awareness for a few minutes.

In a blink of an eye, Major General Fareeha Amari took her mother's former position as commander of Enyo. The ceremony was grand, with Ana and Kamilah in the front row gazing proudly up at their daughter. Angela stood off to the side, looking on with a tender ache in her chest.

In a blink of an eye, Kamilah managed to imbue one of the crystals Angela had given her with the masking spell she had created. Before she could go even further, the 87-year-old collapsed from a heart attack. On her deathbed, she entrusted all her notes and materials to Angela, to be brought back to her in the next life. She told Fareeha that she was the best daughter Kamilah ever had, was informed that Fareeha was the only daughter she ever had, then reminded her daughter that though she had a wit too sharp, was loved dearly. She told Ana to stop crying because she did not look good with puffy eyes, promised to see her again in another life, and asked to be held close so her wife's warmth would be the last thing she felt.

In a blink of an eye, Ana followed her wife into the Aether, at the age of 90. She left behind a will that gave Fareeha sole possession of the Amari estate, and a personal video for the two women. Ana reassured Fareeha that she would have no other daughter other than her, whom she loved and was utterly proud of, and that any future lives which involved Fareeha would be a fulfilling one indeed. She then told Angela to be strong, to stay and be with Fareeha always, and to watch over Kamilah when Ana was unable to. Angela embraced Fareeha, who bore her loss with rigid shoulders and moist eyes, patting her gently and murmuring soothing words into her ear, as she had always done before.

In a blink of an eye, Angela felt trepidation when she turned over in bed and realised Fareeha was gone. The retired general lay on her back, in a perfect picture of one peacefully asleep. Angela moved her head forward to rest on her inert chest, pressing her ear to listen for a heartbeat that was no longer there. She stayed like that for half the day, holding onto Fareeha, shedding quiet tears onto the worn and well-loved t-shirt. Then she placed one final kiss on Fareeha's lips, called the paramedics, and returned to her home in Sanctuary.

In a blink of an eye, the crystal pendant grew warm again on her skin. Angela pulled the pendant from under her top, to see the pale rose-coloured glow lighting up the crystal. She performed her duties as a healer during the day, and snuck away from Sanctuary at night, returning illicit notes and materials back into Kamilah's possession, working on a possible escape from this endless cycle they had been cast into.

It was the second lifetime since Kamilah had first spoken to Angela. In the first reincarnation after then, she had been unable to find Ana, but took solace in her pet project and Angela's company.

In the second – this one – she managed not only to find Ana, but also won her heart.

That was why Angela was surprised to find the house unusually quiet on a weekend. She warped into the cozy apartment's living room, carrying a few scrolls, texts, and a box housing more crystals. Walking over to where Kamilah sat at the dining table, Angela set the items down and noticed the two cardboard boxes sitting by the entranceway. That, combined with the stony look on the woman's face as she stared down at the notes on the table, Angela assumed it was not good news.

"Kamilah," she greeted the woman, setting a hand on her shoulder.

Kamilah, with an expression graver than any that should sit on a 33-year-old's face, turned her gaze slowly towards the Sentinel.

"Where's Ana?" Angela asked, just to be sure. She watched the woman's eyes darken, then the door's *click* rang through the house. Phasing out of view, Angela stepped back from the dining table.

Ana walked slowly out of the entranceway, casting her eyes briefly around to look for Kamilah – who had her back towards the door – and paused. Her lips pursed, eyes soft and apologetic, as she went over to Kamilah's seat. Carefully, she laid the house keys on the wooden table. Ana stayed there for a few moments, looking down at Kamilah who had not moved a muscle.

"I'm going," she said, to no reply. A slight hesitation, then, "Bye."

Kamilah closed her eyes when Ana moved back to the entranceway. Picking up the boxes easily, Ana turned to look at Kamilah again, then left the house without another word. Angela waited a couple of seconds more before becoming visible again, and sat down in a chair adjacent to Kamilah. She set a hand on her shoulder, catching a hint of moisture glinting in the woman's eyes.

"Are you alright?" Angela asked gently.

She stayed motionless a while longer, then her hand jerked towards the texts that Angela had lain on the table. Flipping the thick cover open, Kamilah took a ragged breath, exhaled, then swallowed thickly. She turned the pages slowly, and stopped when Angela squeezed her shoulder.

"You don't have to do this now," Angela said. "You can take a break, or–"

"No." Kamilah's voice was flat, mechanical like the way she turned the pages. "I'm used to it."

"That doesn't mean it's any less unpleasant."

Kamilah closed her eyes again, clenching her jaw. She took another breath, then muttered, "I don't suppose I could convince you to destroy my soul right now."

Angela sighed. "But you haven't given the Council a slap in their faces yet," she said, echoing a joking statement the woman had made once before.

Kamilah glanced at her, mouth slowly quirking into a smile. It was tight, but a smile nevertheless.

Kamilah had a touch of grey in her temples, when Angela managed to condense a spell into a piece of crystal – enough to conceal a soul's energy indefinitely. It shattered from the force of the energy after a few days, but it was still progress.

She poured countless time and effort into refining the spell, so that it was a calm core of energy swirling within a sturdier, rarer crystal Angela had found near the Well of Chaos. She had sustained a few injuries from the chaotic manifestations while collecting the crystals, but it was worth to see Kamilah's smile as she lay in the hospital bed, face lined with age and wreathed by a full head of white hair. The old woman gazed at the softly glowing crystal Angela held before her, then nodded and pulled her hand down.

After taking a laborious breath, she asked, "Do you miss Fareeha?"

"Yes."

"Do you think we'll see her in the next one?"

"I don't know."

Kamilah gave a close-lipped smile. "You know, Angela. In lives before, where I didn't have Ana, I would die alone."

"You won't be alone again. You'll have me."

"Thank you."

Angela found Genji in Sanctuary's training hall, practicing his sword swings in a vicious dance and demolishing yet another wooden dummy, adding it to the sea of splinters and dust and jagged chunks covering the floor. She waited by the side until he was done, then went over to him when he finally fell into a bench, panting. Healing the broken blisters on his palms, Angela noted the angry yet helpless expression on his face as he dragged a newly-healed hand across his eyes.

"Lost someone?" she asked gently.

Genji's jaw worked in silence. He had taken a liking to this man he had been assigned. Talked her ear off about how closely he resembled a monk Genji had watched over a few lifetimes ago. He did not mention specifically, but she suspected his feelings ran deeper than he ever let on.

She sat beside Genji and patted his back as he stared at the training mats, tears mingling with sweat trailing down his face.

Did the Council lay down that precious rule thinking about *their* protection, Angela wondered.

In the next life, Angela found Kamilah back in the world of swords, bows, and magic. The same world where she first met Fareeha. It turned out to be a fortuitous circumstance, because Kamilah's involvement in the mage's guild helped their project advance much further than it ever could in a mundane world.

Together, they made great strides in developing a counterspell against the Sentinels' scrying magic. Their masking spell was well and good, but should the Council decide to predict their movements, their plan could be stopped before it even took flight.

The years went by in a flurry. Angela was kept busy between her duties in Sanctuary and as Kamilah's aide, the human sort of becoming her 'charge' as well. Though she could not use her magic without rousing suspicion, she took care of the woman, listened to her grievances about the guild's problems, and watched her fall for a dashing archer who moved into the city.

Angela mourned the two when they died side by side defending their home from invaders.

Biting on her lip to stop the victorious grin from spreading, Angela kept her eyes closed and tightened her grip over the staff. The crease between her brows deepened as she focused, delving much deeper into the deep intricate web of countless souls. With Kamilah's soul signature in mind, she reached out with her magic, trying to create a resonance that flashed vague smoky outlines in her mind, before it vanished completely.

Success.

But to be cautious, Angela repeated the process for the twelfth time. The crystal embedded between twin golden wings at the tip of her staff glowed brightly with the force of her scrying magic, as she tried to predict Kamilah's movements yet again. She could feel a bead of perspiration trickling down her temple, but was rewarded with nothing but blackness. Not the future that she had tried to see.

Angela opened her eyes, laughter bubbling up from her chest. She held her pendant in a hand, opening a telepathic channel.

"Kamilah."

"Did it work?"

"Yes!"

She felt a similar surge of elation through the crystal. *"Thank heavens. I might have gone crazy if it didn't. Why don't you come back? We need to celebrate."*

"On my way."

Angela stood up from the space she cleared in her living room and stretched her back. She set her staff aside, and warped back to the mortal realm with much more enthusiasm she ever remembered bearing. The sight of a modern kitchen greeted her, along with Kamilah, whose wide grin crinkled the corners of her eyes.

"It worked," Angela said, opening her arms to envelope the woman in a tight hug.

"We finally did it," Kamilah sighed, leaning back. "And it only took us, what, nearly 300 years?"

"A short time, if I might say so myself." Angela smiled, contentment settling into her heart at the sight of Kamilah. It was the first time she seemed truly happy in this life, since Ana's marriage to another.

Kamilah patted her arm and stepped away to check on the food in the oven. Then she shirked the mitts when she was done, and waved Angela over to the dining counter where the women took a seat on the stools.

"It seems our plan is ready to go," Kamilah stated, watching her closely.

"It does."

"Are you sure you want to go through with it?"

Angela blinked. "Of course."

"Fareeha will not exist after I have broken free."

"I understand." Angela laid a hand over Kamilah's. This was a discussion they had had many times before. "Are *you* sure? Wandering the realms as a lost soul is going to be another form of torture."

"I won't remember anything, would I?" Angela nodded. "Then it would be a blessing in disguise. Angela," she added softly at the Sentinel's lowered gaze. "I am ready. But I will wait if--"

"No." Angela took a steadying breath, and met Kamilah's eyes. "I am ready as well."

The plan was this: Angela would remain in Sanctuary until she was summoned back to Fareeha's side. She would then make contact with Kamilah, and keep up the charade until Ana and Fareeha had time to make peace with the ex-Sentinel's decision. Then, with Angela's help, Kamilah would sever her bond with the Aether, and the Amari's souls would vanish from the Sentinels' 'map'. The Council would no doubt sense Kamilah's disappearance, so Angela had volunteered to remain in Sanctuary instead of going into hiding as well. If all went according to plan, the Amari would be able to live together as a family one last time, before Kamilah's soul passes from her body and is doomed to wander the realm as one of the displaced. Angela would keep an eye on her and dissolve the soul if necessary.

A grim end, but one the woman was willing to meet nonetheless.

Angela stood off to the side with arms crossed, watching Ana exchange a few private words with Kamilah before they went through with the severance. Both their hairs were almost fully white now. Part of her wished they could have done it sooner, but...

She smiled as a calloused hand slipped into hers, and gently turned her around. Fareeha's face was a little tense from nervousness, but her gaze still bore that warmth reserved for Angela alone. She smiled as she tugged Angela nearer, slim hand coming to rest on the warrior's leather jerkin.

"Anything to say before you leave for Sanctuary?"

"Anything I have to say, you already know," she murmured, closing her eyes as Fareeha's forehead bumped against hers.

"I love you," Fareeha said equally quietly.

"I love you too."

They stayed silent for two heartbeats, then Fareeha asked yet again, "Are you sure you want to go?"

"Yes," Angela repeated. "I can ensure your safety better from there. I will know if the Council catches onto you."

"It'll be dangerous."

"It is danger that you cannot protect me from." The hand around hers tightened at the simple statement of fact. "It will be safer for you to stay with your mother. Kamilah has magic to protect all of you, at least."

Angela paused then, waiting for an answer. But Fareeha's lips were pursed tightly in quiet loathing of their situation. So Angela tilted her head up, coaxing her out with a kiss, and kept her anchored in the present with another.

"I will be with you after everything has blown over. I swear it," Angela told her. Fareeha held her

longer, then finally relented with a smile and nod. When Angela turned away from the warrior, she found Kamilah already sitting at the hewn wooden table, ready to begin.

Angela held out a hand, into which Kamilah placed her own pendant – which was attuned to her own soul. The blonde wrapped the thin braided cord around her knuckles, so the sliver of crystal rested squarely in her palm. She glanced up at Kamilah.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." Her voice was strong, steady.

Feeling her heart beat faster, Angela pressed her hand to the centre of Kamilah's chest, so the crystal was sandwiched in between. A blood red glow crept out from under her hand as Angela closed her eyes, performing the severance spell no Sentinel was allowed to cast without permission from the Council. She felt Kamilah's soul in its entirety, rose-tinged wisps taking its place in her mind's eye. Angela felt along its surface, identifying each and every tether hooked into the wisp-flesh that connected this unique soul back to the Aether. Slowly, she gathered the vicious tendrils of her own magic around each point of contact, making sure she had a firm hold on all.

Angela felt Kamilah's fear mix with her own, heart pounding noticeably in her chest. Breaths came shorter now, but she controlled it, calmed it down. She counted in her head. 1. 2. 3.

The blinding flash of red seared through her eyelids as Angela ripped the tethers from Kamilah's soul. A harsh, guttural cry tore through Kamilah's throat, and she jerked violently forward, arms thudding against the tabletop as she reeled in agony. Angela stepped back as Ana and Fareeha rushed forward, holding onto Kamilah's shoulders, her body shaking as though she were caught in a blizzard. Placing a hand on her back, Angela poured her healing magic into Kamilah to smooth over the disintegrating spots in the woman's soul, soothing her pain.

It took a prolonged moment, but Kamilah soon pushed herself back up. Still panting weakly, she took her pendant back from Angela and activated the spells they had created, enveloping the three in protective fields.

"Go," she breathed, gripping onto Angela's wrist. "I'll be fine. They cannot know you were with us."

Angela squeezed the woman's arm, placed one last peck on Fareeha's lips, and warped back to Sanctuary with the utmost reluctance.

Footsteps echoed ominously through the town hall, as Angela was escorted towards the back of the grandiose marble structure. She knew exactly where they were headed – the courtroom where the Council had passed judgment and laid the sentence for her transgression, more than one millennium ago.

Fear and anxiety clashed in her chest as they approached the heavy wooden doors, wondering if the Council knew. The Amari had vanished from under their noses about two weeks ago. Rumours were spreading among the Sentinels, and Angela kept an ear to the ground to catch wind of any plans the Council might have made. But now, it seemed she would find out for herself.

The doors parted and her two fellow Sentinels ushered her further in, so that she stood just before the marble staircase leading up to where the Council sat on ornate golden *thrones* – she thought scathingly – facing her. She bowed with a hand over her heart, her own white Sentinel's robes falling forward at the movement. At a flat acknowledgement, she straightened herself and looked

up.

There were five Council members – each clothed in robes similar to hers, but black in colour with golden trim and elaborate embroidery over sleek fabric. The Overseer sat right in the middle, staring down at her with dark, impenetrable eyes. Angela kept as motionless as possible, until he spoke.

"I have no doubt you are very concerned about your missing charge," he said slowly, with practiced inflection meant to show fatherly concern.

"Yes, I am," Angela replied stonily.

"I am surprised you have not sought our help sooner."

"She is my responsibility. I should be the one to resolve this."

"Ah. How commendable." He tilted his head, wearing an obscene facsimile of a smile. "It reminds me of Jack's...tenacity."

"Thank you." She did not bother to pretend taking to his 'friendliness'. "He is a proud and strong warrior. I have no doubt he would succeed eventually."

His smile grew even wider, and a dark glint appeared in his eye that set Angela on edge. "Oh, have you not heard? Jack has succeeded. That is, with our help."

She frowned. "He didn't want help."

"He did not. But we have decided that his struggle has gone on long enough, and granted him reprieve from all the unnecessary pain."

Angela kept silent.

"We have learnt from our lesson with Jack," the Overseer continued, steepling his fingers. "And we now seek to relieve our Sentinels of any troubles that might plague them." He let his words settle over the room. "That is why we are offering our assistance to you."

"I do not need help."

"But it seems you do. The 'bond' that you share with your charge should have allowed you to locate her effortlessly. That this has dragged on for two weeks means it is helping very little, no? That, or you are allowing this to happen deliberately. Which," he added, voice laced humour. "I am confident is not the case. After all, you have shown unwavering loyalty to the Sentinels and Sanctuary, have you not?"

The Overseer leaned forward in his chair, the smile still carved into his face. "That is why we have decided to grant you help. We will assign four Sentinels to aid in your search for Fareeha Amari. And, to make things easier, we have a little gift for you." He waved his hand, and a door to the side of the stairs swung open.

Angela's eyes widened slightly at the...*thing* that padded out into the courtroom. It was a manifestation of chaotic energy, black mist swirling about the four-legged creature that resembled a hellhound from human legends. Its eyes were red, teeth wicked sharp and bared in a permanent snarl. There was no Sentinel at its side, but it moved towards Angela without urging.

"We have created this specifically for you. It is much like a bloodhound that mortals use for hunts. Except this one hunts for souls." While he spoke, the hound sniffed about Angela, who stood rigid

and fought the impulse to recoil from it. She stared down at the creature, becoming more unsettled as the sense of familiarity seeped into her.

"All it needs is a whiff of residue, and it will focus on nothing but the soul ingrained in its consciousness. It can be mortal, and even those of Sentinels...or ex-Sentinels."

Angela raised her eyes slowly, feeling the ground open up to swallow her. The Overseer's steady gaze gave nothing away. Then a sneer twisted his lips.

"Take full advantage of this gift, my dear Angela. It came at a very high price. Thankfully, it was not yours to pay."

Chill stabbed into her core. "Who paid," she intoned.

"Why don't you ask Jack?"

Her eyes widened. She looked back down at the creature, the familiarity suddenly clicking in her mind. She had encountered this particular manifestation of chaos before. But it had been with Jack at her side, and Gabriel howling in pain as he was torn apart by the very energy that held him together. Her head felt light.

The hound took a final sniff at her wrist – the one Kamilah had held onto – and barked.

"Ah. It has identified its target." The Overseer waved a hand towards the door. "Go with our blessings, Angela. We await news of your success."

The bright sunlight felt unbearably cold on her skin.

Angela trudged in front of her colleagues, keeping in phase so no mortal could see them as they followed after the twisted likeness of a dog. Gabriel. How dare they? *How dare they?* Jack... He must be devastated. But she had no luxury to find out, or even think about him when they were nearing their targets.

The group had been following the hound for five days. Watching it sniff the air and ground, padding ever closer to the concealed family. Eventually, they arrived at a small town bordering a wide stretch of green farmlands – the Amari's second stop as they escaped far from their family home in the desert. The spells that she had engineered with Kamilah were aimed specifically towards the Sentinel's existing magic. Not abominations such as this. Their cover was blown.

And Angela had to make a choice.

The hound's head whipped up. The dark mist that comprised its body sharpened. It bounded forward, passing harmlessly through mortals as it closed in on its target. Angela's blood raced as the Sentinels ran after it, barely keeping up. The hound sprinted straight through the crowd, then phased through the door of a quaint stone building. She started gathering her magic, getting ready for a hellish fight–

An agonised howl pierced the air, the voice snapping Angela's restraint. In an instant, she brought her fists up and slammed them down, sending a torrent of magical force between her and the four Sentinels behind. She heard the thuds of their bodies against the dirty ground, and the surprised shrieks of mortals witnessing the Sentinels fall out of phase. Angela paid them no attention, rushing instead towards the building through which the hound had phased through.

She blasted the door open to find an utterly wrecked home. Almost all its furniture had been smashed into pieces, its walls blackened and cracked from the magic Kamilah threw out. The

hound – now corporeal – was blasted by a sharp gust of wind and slammed into the far corner, across from where Ana lay with a maimed arm dripping with blood. Fareeha stood before her with sword at ready, but it was Kamilah who held up most of the combat, raining spell after spell onto the hound as it tried to get up.

The creature finally stood on its four paws and leapt at its target without warning. Angela shot a spear of light while it was in mid-air, piercing straight through its middle and pinning it to the wall. The hound howled in fury and pain, writhing to break free from the binding magic that kept it in place. The Amari had just hauled Ana back onto her feet, the woman leaning heavily on the other two, when Angela's attention was brought back to her colleagues.

They stood before the Amari's temporary lodgings, fanned out in a semi-circle with their respective weapons in hand: two swords, one spear, and one staff. Angela summoned her own staff into being as she shifted her feet apart, ready for combat. She felt a movement to her side, and turned her head to find Fareeha standing beside her, holding her sword up. Angela had no heart to tell her the Sentinels easily outmatched her, a mere mortal with no magic, but still drew strength from her sturdy presence.

"Angela," one of the Sentinels called. "The Overseer is aware of your collusion with the fallen one. And he has instructed us to offer you one last chance to redeem yourself. Aid us in Kamilah's capture, and you will–"

"Shut up," Angela snapped, the sinking feeling in her stomach replaced by ire. "The Overseer can take his false compassion and shove it up his pompous ass." Fareeha glanced briefly at her. "You will take Kamilah over my dead body."

"Very well."

Erecting a shield around Fareeha and herself with one hand, Angela struck out with her staff, sending forth a lightning storm so fierce, it forced Fareeha to take two bracing steps backward. Her magic clashed with the Sentinels'. Her shield buckled under the combined force of two spells her lightning had failed to catch. When the air cleared, she flung her staff out in front of Fareeha, catching the sword aimed for her throat. It was an obvious decoy – another Sentinel flew forward with a spear aimed for her. But before she reached Angela, two horses rammed into her side and sent her flying further down the road. Looking up in confusion, she found Jack's scarred face frowning down at her. The man was riding a horse cart, and wore his set of Sentinel armour – made of sleek, dark blue adamantium.

"Get on and get the hell out," was all he growled, before he drew two swords from the scabbards on his back and leapt at their pursuers.

Angela pushed Fareeha towards the rider's seat, and went back in the house to help carry Ana onto the simple cart. Kamilah climbed in after her.

Pausing with one foot on the small wooden step, Angela shouted, "Jack!"

"Go!" he yelled without a backward glance, busy with keeping *four* of his former colleagues occupied. "I'll catch up!"

Angela hopped up onto the wooden cart. She called Fareeha's name, and the cart was promptly set in motion. Seizing the chance to create a distraction, Angela gathered magic in her hands and flung them forward, catching two Sentinels with spinning torrents of fire. Then Jack took advantage of their momentary distraction to break away. Reaching for a fist-sized metallic ball hanging from his belt, he uttered a single word, and the arcane symbols on the device glowed. He tossed it behind him as he ran, and a great ice wall rose where the ball landed, cutting the Sentinels

off from them. He made a magically-bolstered leap, and landed neatly in the cart as they pulled out of town.

"Jack, why—"

"You saw what they did to Gabriel," he spat, and did not explain further. Jack held onto her arm and turned her around, so that she saw Kamilah trying desperately to heal Ana's wound.

Angela knelt down beside Ana, gently peeling Kamilah's bloodstained hands away. She tore off the long sleeve, and stared at the damaged arm wordlessly. Ana wore two deep gashes down the length of her bicep, from which blood was pouring from. But that was not what had Angela stunned. Blackened veins were visible over the entire arm and – Angela glanced at Ana's face – they were creeping up her neck, towards her jaw. It seemed to be spreading across her body. Ana's eyes were glazed over, lips parted as she took shallow breaths.

"It's the corruption," Jack muttered, crouching beside her. "But it's spreading much too quickly to be natural."

"They weaponised it." Hopelessness sat heavily on Angela's shoulders even as she dispelled what chaotic energy she could from Ana's wounds, and healed them. Ana's skin was growing colder by the minute, and she could not seem to focus on anything other than Kamilah, who was shedding quiet tears over her. But something more insidious made Angela reach a little deeper and discover—

"Kamilah," Angela said gently. "Ana's soul. It's being eaten away by the corruption."

"That...thing," Kamilah whispered.

"Yes. The Overseer..." Her words faded away when Kamilah bent her head down. The woman's trembling hand gripped tightly onto Ana's leather jerkin.

"I'm sorry," Kamilah rasped through hitched breaths. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I'm sorry."

Ana clutched weakly onto her wrist, corners of her mouth arching laboriously into a smile.

"Milah. I—" Her fingers loosened, gaze growing empty as her last breath mingled with the warm afternoon air.

A choked sob escaped Kamilah's lips as she rested her head on Ana's, hair falling forward to cover her face. Angela caught sight of tears trickling down Fareeha's cheeks, before her lips drew into a thin line, and she turned back to focus the road. Angela knelt in place dumbly before Jack tugged her away.

"Angela, listen to me," he said, making sure her eyes were on him before he continued. "There is a rebellion taking place in Sanctuary."

She stared at him, processing his words. "What?"

He nodded. "After what they did to Gabriel, I went and spoke to a few others. There are some who are dissatisfied with the Council's leadership. Genji, Mei, Winston, Hanzo. We had a discussion, and I revealed what they did to Gabriel. They went on to talk to their friends as well. Angela—" He clasped onto her shoulder. "We are going to...ask the Council to step down."

"But Jack—"

"Angela," he cut her off. "They do not listen to us anymore. They have forgotten their duty to *protect* humanity. When they were mutilating Gabriel's soul, I had a glimpse into their private

laboratories. They were experimenting on *souls*, Angela. Mortal souls they have siphoned away from the realms."

"*Why?*"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But that horror in their labs? It has to stop. Now."

"But—, why didn't you tell me?"

"The Overseer had his eye on you. Genji has...eavesdropped on some of the Council meetings. They knew you were planning something with Kamilah, and were watching you very closely. You were a perfect decoy," Jack said, having the decency to look a little sheepish.

Angela dragged a hand down her face, suddenly feeling more exhausted than ever. She was about to ask another question, when Jack's gaze became unfocused, faraway. She waited patiently until his telepathic communication had ended, and his eyes refocused on her.

"We have taken over half of Sanctuary, but the Council are fighting back. Three of them are dead. The remaining two are making their way to the Well of Chaos. We need to go and help stop them—"

"But Fareeha and Kamilah? I can't just leave them behind—"

A distant, vicious bark caught their attention. Angela and Jack turned to see the hound pumping its clawed feet across the dirt road, eating up the distance to the cart effortlessly. They threw a spell at it in unison, but it bounded high into the air, avoiding the attack. Before they could react, it swooped down, front paws catching onto the side of the cart and sending it tumbling off the road. Angela and Jack warped out of the cart unharmed, but Fareeha and Kamilah were thrown painfully across the grass. Ana's body lay draped over a corner of the cart.

The hound barely stopped in its tracks when Angela and Jack's lightning spells shot through its body, and sank its fangs right through Kamilah's neck before she could rise from the ground. Fareeha's aggrieved scream shook the air, and she swung her sword at the hound's neck. But it passed harmlessly through the dark mist, the hound dissolving into a cloud and re-manifesting off to the side. Angela did not give it time to react, and locked it down with her binding magic.

The four Sentinels hot in pursuit finally arrived at the scene, but Jack flung out an arm before she could move.

"I'll handle them," he said, taking a bulky cylinder that he carried on his back. He flung it towards their hunters, where it floated and conjured a contained blizzard that froze the Sentinels in their tracks. Jack gave her a nod, then walked towards the four.

Angela turned her attention back to the hound, which was starting to break through its cage of light. She glanced to the side, where Ana's body lay and Fareeha cradled her dying mother in her arms, weeping audibly. Rage that had simmered below the surface through the countless lives of torture erupted, and Angela clamped down on the abomination. For the first time in her entire existence, she felt a surge of wicked satisfaction as the chaotic energy and monster of a soul broke within her grasp. She closed her fist slowly, the abomination's pathetic howls joining with Fareeha's cries, until it was no more. The Chaos dissipated, and the violated remnant of a soul hung in the air.

She watched it hover for a few seconds, before it floated over to Jack and plastered itself onto his shoulder, as he drove his sword through the last frozen Sentinel's heart. Angela tore her eyes away from Jack when he touched the soul gently, and quickly went over to Fareeha.

Kamilah was gone. Her body was limp in Fareeha's hold. Angela crouched beside Fareeha, setting a hand on her back. Silently, she weaved the same magic she had used ages ago, to tie Fareeha's crumbling soul in place. Focusing on the two weakening energies, Angela expended a significant amount of her magic, forming a shield around the souls before the parasitic energy could destroy them completely.

"Fareeha," Angela said gently. She lifted Fareeha's chin with one hand, wiping the tears. "I can keep their souls intact for a while longer. After the rebellion in Sanctuary has ended, I'll look into bringing them back."

Incomprehension shone through the wet eyes. "What?"

"Angela." Jack's shadow fell over them. "I'll return to Sanctuary for the last push. Only the Overseer and a few of his cronies are left. Want to come along?"

She glanced at Fareeha, whose gaze had lowered to her mother's face again. "No, Jack. I'll stay here."

"Alright. I'll come back for you when we're done." With that, Jack warped away in a swirl of blue light.

Angela turned her head to look down at Kamilah's bloodless and black-streaked face, feeling a lump rise in her throat. She circled an arm around Fareeha's shoulder in a tight, supporting hold. Fareeha alternated between sobs and uncontrollable weeping, which gradually lightened to the point where she was too exhausted to shed any more tears. The sun had long gone down by the time Fareeha settled into a stony, lost silence.

Angela had to warp Fareeha back to her family home from which they had escaped, and made sure she ate at least a small bun before Angela tucked her into bed. Fareeha's face was still blank from the emotional toil. Angela promised to return from Sanctuary to be with her soon, and to leave her parents' situation to her. Fareeha shed a few more tears before she finally fell asleep under Angela's ministrations.

Jack escorted her back to Sanctuary with Kamilah and Ana's bodies in tow. Nearly half of their idyllic little city had been turned into rubble, and a few bodies still littered the shattered streets. They deposited the women's bodies into stasis chambers under Mei's care, and brought their souls to Winston's lab, where the Chaos infection could be removed and the crumbled soul pieces could be melded together, to be made whole again. Jack left the remnants of Gabriel's soul with Winston as well, for safekeeping until they decided what was to be done with it.

Garius, the former Overseer, had been stripped of his title by his temporary successor, Reinhardt – the stalwart warrior who had led the rebels' fight against the Council. The fallen leader had been thrown into one of the few prison cells underneath the court house while the remaining Sentinels sifted through his nightmare of a laboratory. He was trying to find a way to control a soul's will, so that it would bend to his every whim. It seemed that his goal was to create mindless subjects who would not waver in their blind loyalty for him, and perform their jobs without any complications.

His efforts were supported by the Council, who were aware of how much more inhumane his experiments became, but did not care. Garius first played with displaced souls, then took to ripping those from living mortals, then kidnapping the mortals themselves and tinkering with their sentience and consciousness. If the twisted expressions frozen on the bodies were any proof, the mortals did not die an easy death.

For his acts, the Sentinels voted to have Garius's soul broken down into its purest essence, and

sent to merge with the Chaos.

Angela had watched as they extracted his soul and delivered it into the Well, but did not share in her fellow Sentinels' sense of victory.

She could feel nothing.

Reinhardt had loosened the previous Council's rules to accomodate the Amari's situation. He allowed Angela to bring Fareeha to Sanctuary, where she had to wear an amulet to keep her soul anchored – preventing her from being dragged away by the inexorable pull of the Aether.

The woman remained near-catatonic as Angela guided her through the city, taking in the not-so-wondrous sight with blank eyes. She kept Fareeha's hand in her own, all the way to Mei's lab. The perky woman – who looked haggard from recent events – led Fareeha over to the two stasis chambers where her parents lay.

Laying a hand over each of the chambers, Fareeha stared at the women – who had been cleaned of blood and dirt, their wounds closed. She stayed in front of them for so long, that Mei shot Angela a worried glance. But eventually, Fareeha turned her head to look at the Sentinels, rasping hoarsely, "Will they be okay?"

Angela nodded. "It might take a while, but they will be."

Slowly, Fareeha's gaze shifted from her and back to the chambers. She stayed there for the entire day, and Angela brought in a cot so she could sleep there as well.

The air over Sanctuary was much lighter than Angela had ever remembered. The sun much brighter. The wind cooler. Her home, for the first time in years, truly felt like a home again.

Angela strolled down the streets slowly, still wearing the same long-sleeved top and jeans she had taken a liking to. With hands in her pockets, she took in a breath of fresh air, and smiled at those who had glanced up from their repair work on buildings to greet her. They all looked as light as Angela felt. For some, life had practically gone back to normal, and they were adapting to the more genial leadership of Reinhardt quickly. She even spotted Genji being smacked over the head by Hanzo, whom the green-haired 'ninja' never stopped annoying. Some though, were still recovering from the harrowing experience, when they were forced to cut down friends and familiar faces.

She spotted Kamilah walking alone to the sprawling garden by the Sentinel's residences, and caught up to her. Both Kamilah and Ana's souls had been pieced together painstakingly after months of work, until eventually their souls were whole again and could be placed safely back in their bodies. Fareeha had clung onto them when they stepped out of the stasis chambers, dissolving into tears yet again at the long-awaited reunion.

Since then, Ana and Fareeha had taken to exploring Sanctuary together. Kamilah, on the other hand, preferred to wander around by herself like she was doing now.

"Would you like some company?" Angela asked as she came up behind the woman.

Kamilah turned and smiled. She wore the simple flowing robes of a Sentinel, and looked more like the woman Angela remembered from many lifetimes ago, before she was cast down.

"Of course."

They walked in companionable silence, entering the garden and walking along the path through patches of flowers and shrubs and trees, until they reached the crest of the garden's sole hill. From there, they could look out from the floating island that was Sanctuary, at the swirling vortexes surrounding it, in which different realities resided.

"This was one of my favourite spots in Sanctuary," Kamilah said, clasping both hands behind her back as she kept her eyes on the view. "It feels so...strange to be back."

"Oh?"

"I never thought I'd see this again." She laughed softly. "I don't think I even wanted to see this again."

"I guess Sanctuary does harbour a few bad memories for you."

"And you as well."

Angela nodded when Kamilah glanced over at her. Then she asked, "Have you thought about Reinhardt's offer?"

"Yes. And I will not accept it."

"You don't want to be restored to your original position?"

"No. I thought I told you, Angela," she said with a quirked brow. "I would give anything to just live one life with my family, without fear of having to spend the next few without them."

She nodded again, and they fell back into silence.

Then Kamilah spoke, "I am thinking of asking Reinhardt to turn me mortal. Truly mortal. To let me be part of the endless cycle of rebirth like all the rest." She nodded at the vortexes. "To be able to forget after each life. To be given a clean slate. It would be a welcome reprieve, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would."

"What about you?"

Angela breathed in, but found no words with which to form her answer. For she did not have one.

If Angela could freeze time forever, she would choose to do it at this moment.

They were sitting next to the window in her house's attic, looking out at the bright and lovely neighbourhood. Fareeha leant against the wall, with the blonde sitting between her legs, Angela's back moulded perfectly against her front. Her arm around Angela's waist never moved, and she placed kisses on top of blonde tresses at random intervals. Angela would smile at each kiss, and run soft fingertips over the back of Fareeha's hand.

Fareeha raised her mug of hot chocolate – she had insisted on drinking this even though it was rather warm outside – and took another sip, making the cup half-empty. The sweet aroma passed by her nose when Fareeha set the cup down on the floor again.

"Darling?" Angela murmured.

"Yes, love?"

"Do you believe in fate?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do you believe in soul mates?"

"I do." The arm around Angela squeezed lightly. "I have mine right here."

A smile curved her lips. "Do you think we'd ever meet each other again, if we were both mortals?"

Fareeha paused. "That depends on fate, doesn't it?" she said, voice light.

"So you do believe in fate."

She chuckled. "So it seems."

"Fareeha?"

"Hm?"

Angela turned her head slightly, nestling deeper under Fareeha's chin. "I love you."

"I love you too." Fareeha caught her fingers with a hand. "Angela?"

"Hm?"

"No matter what you decide, I'll support you," Fareeha said, correctly guessing the subject Angela could not broach. "I just want you to be happy."

Reinhardt's heartbroken expression nearly changed her mind. Nearly.

"Are you sure, Angela?" he asked, with every bit of concern and reluctance hanging visibly on his features.

"Yes. I would like to be mortal after completing my watch over Fareeha in this lifetime."

"But..."

"It is what I want." Angela laid a hand over his massive one.

"But you wouldn't be able to remember Fareeha. Or anything you have shared before. Are you sure?"

"Yes. Ignorance is bliss, is it not?"

Reinhardt opened his mouth, but closed it again without another word at the resolute look on Angela's face. He rose out of his chair and enveloped her in a bear hug.

"I, for one, will remember you always, Angela."

"Ami, I'm on duty right now!"

"No, you're not. Technically you're on your way to duty."

"As long as I'm in my Raptora suit, I am on duty."

"Whatever. I'm the General, so you have to talk to me. Don't force me to give you an order."

Fareeha groaned and paused in her tracks. She moved to the side, standing between the tents so she would not obstruct anyone bustling about the Cairo field camp. Bringing up the video transmission on her visor, she put on her best reproving look.

"Happy birthday, darling," her mothers sang through the radio, knocking the scowl right off her face.

"You called just to wish me 'happy birthday'?"

"Well, yes. That, and..." Ana tilted the camera down so that Fareeha was treated to the sight of a tray of casserole, various side dishes, and two glasses of red wine. *"To torture you."*

"Oh come on. You're celebrating my birthday without me?"

"No. We're celebrating that together this weekend, remember?" Kamilah said, mirthful grin on her lips.

"Then why all that food?"

"We want to celebrate being together while our daughter slogs in the field."

Fareeha sighed. "Ami, I'm going to be late. I don't want to keep the doctor waiting."

"Oh alright," Ana said in defeat. *"Enjoy your birthday, little one."*

"We love you," Kamilah added.

"I love you too. Both of you. Even though you are the most ridiculous parents in the world."

"Hey!"

Fareeha grinned. "I have to go. Enjoy yourselves. And don't have too much fun."

"Oh, my dear daughter," Ana said with a smirk. *"We're going to have so much fun the neighbours—"*

"Okay, bye!"

Fareeha ended the transmission, then stepped out of her little corner with a smile. Her mothers would be the death of her, truly.

The field hospital came into view, and extraneous thoughts fell away from her mind. She walked in, casting her eyes around for the one she was to pick up—

There she was.

With purposeful strides, Fareeha made her way through the cots, to the front of the office partitions. She stopped in front of the doctor, who looked up from the computer she was focused on and blinked in surprise.

"Doctor Angela Ziegler?"

"Yes. And you are the soldier escorting me all the way to Russia." The blonde smiled at her nod. "Will you be wearing that the whole time? It doesn't look very comfortable."

"Yes, Doctor. And the Raptora is rather comfortable, I assure you. Although I do appreciate your concern." The last few words flew out of Fareeha's mouth before she knew what was happening. She blinked, then realised her goddamned visor was still down, blocking her face from view. Fareeha quickly lifted it, just in time to see the doctor's smile grow wider.

"Just give me a moment to get my things." Doctor Ziegler tapped into her keyboard rapidly, then hurried off and disappeared into an office. In no time at all, she reappeared without her lab coat, and with a bag slung over her shoulders. She started to gesture at Fareeha, then stopped.

"I never caught your name."

"Major Faeeha Amari, ma'am."

"Ah. Major, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Have we met before, by any chance?"

"No. Although...you *do* seem familiar, Doctor."

"Angela."

"Angela," Fareeha repeated smoothly. The name fell off her tongue so easily, she was almost sure she had said it many times before. But then again, if she ever met anyone as lovely as the doctor, she would...

Wincing inwardly, Fareeha caught herself for the second time. Then she nodded at Angela, and they strode out of the field hospital together.

"We'll be spending the next day together, Major."

"Yes."

"Why don't you tell me a little about yourself? I'd hate to treat you as just another bodyguard."

"On one condition, Angela."

"And that is?"

"Call me Fareeha."

The smile on Angela's face was more brilliant than the Cairo sun. "Of course, Fareeha."

Strange. Her name felt so right on the doctor's tongue.

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